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JUNE 19 & 26, 2000

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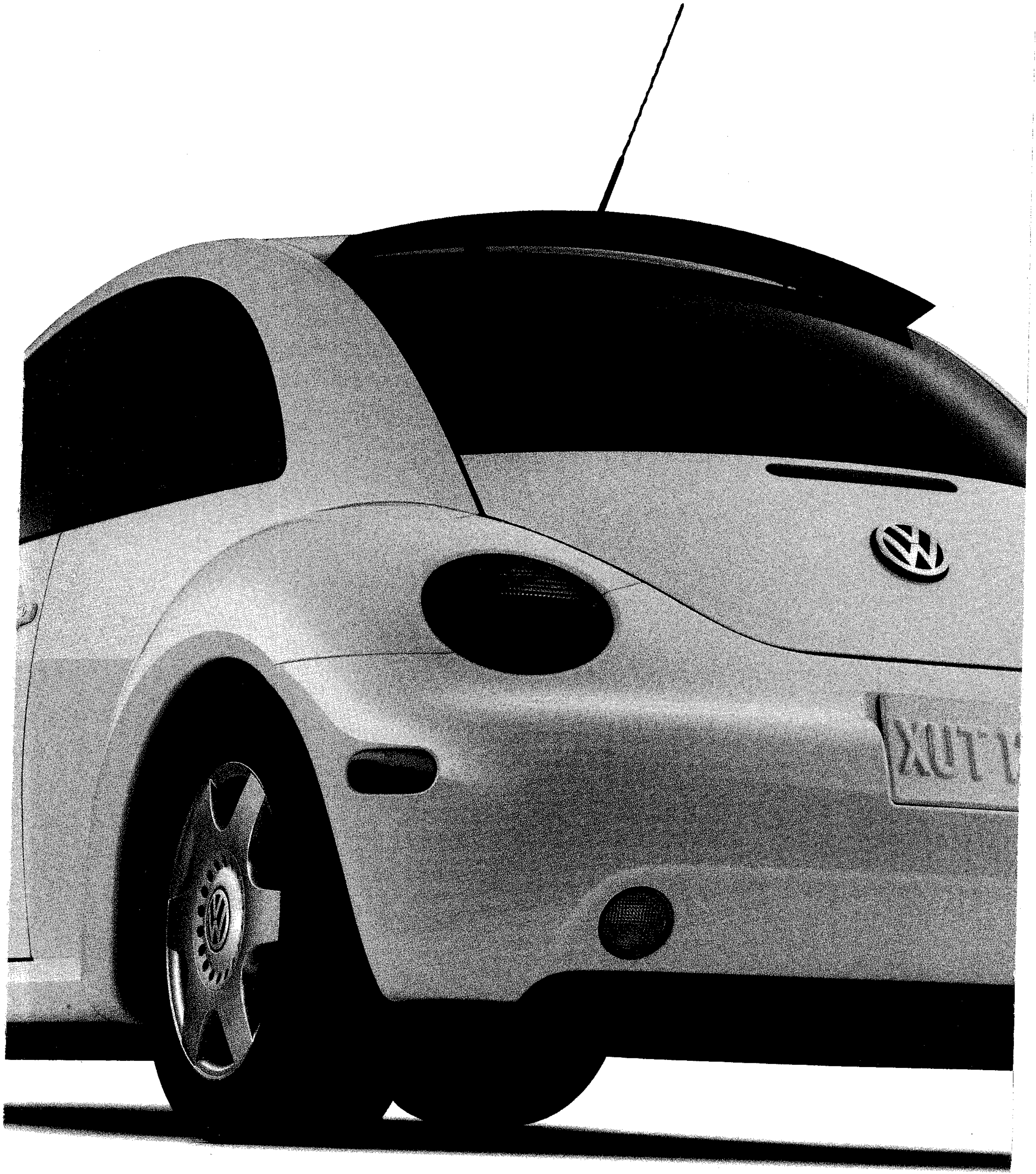
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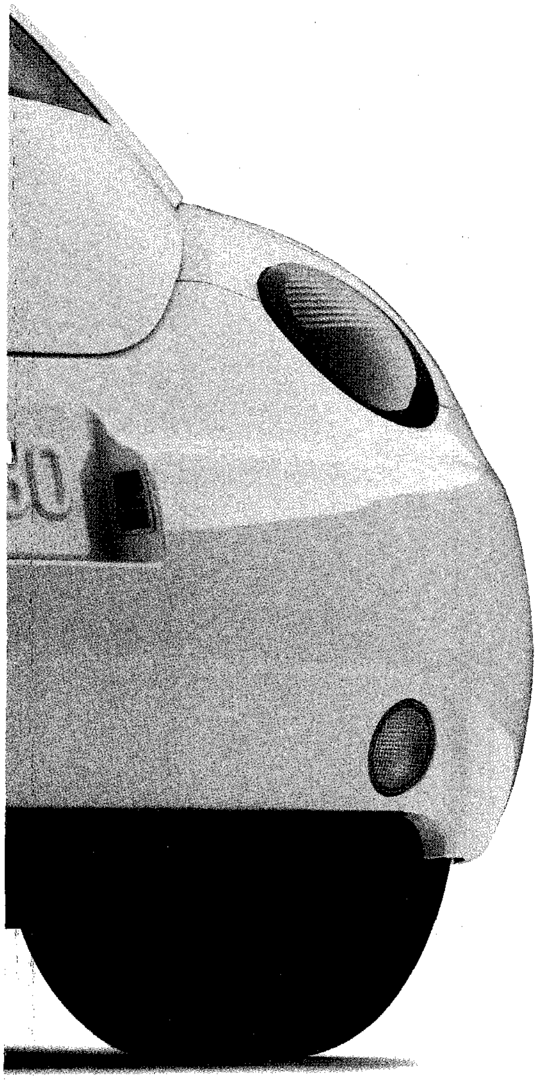
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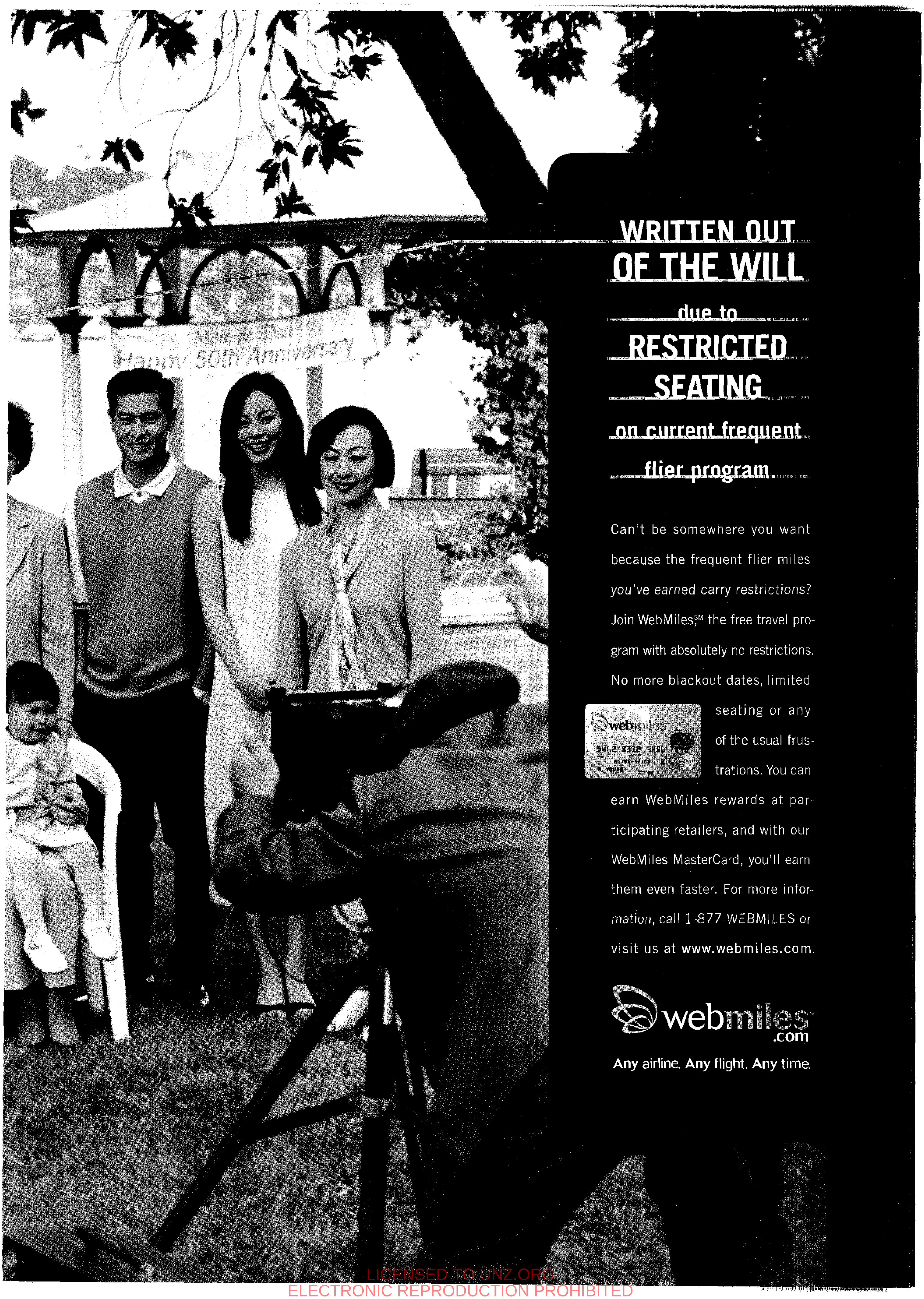

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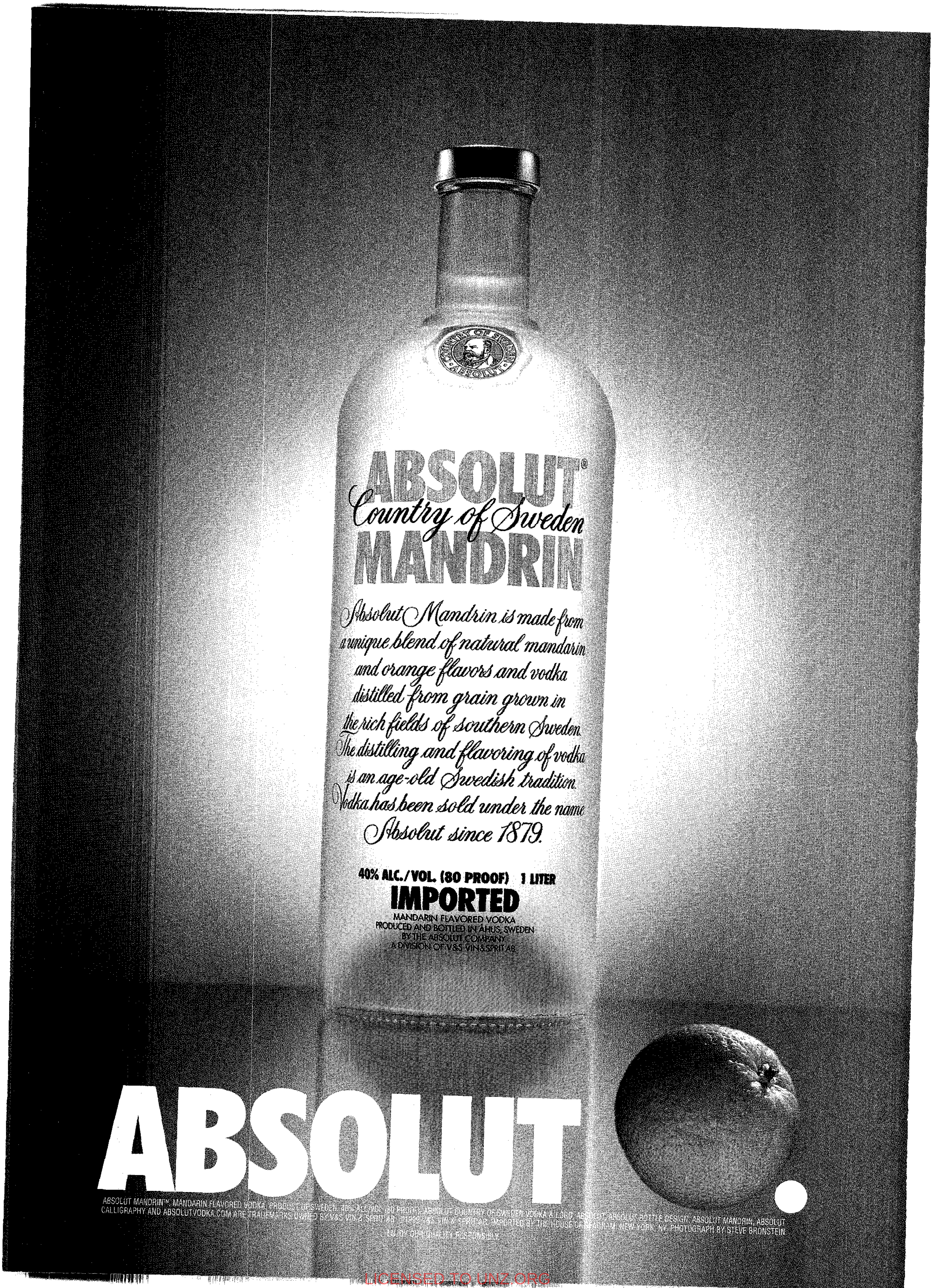
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THE NEW YORKER
SUMMER FICTION ISSUE

JUNE 19 & 26, 2000

18 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

69 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
The legal perils of fatherhood; not your naked ex-girlfriend; Williamsburg's Stockholm syndrome.

Stephen King 78 PERSONAL HISTORY
On Impact
Surviving a crash and learning how to write again.

Tobias Wolff 91 NOTEBOOK
In the Hay
A boy, a farm, and a gun.

Salman Rushdie 94 LETTER FROM INDIA
A Dream of Glorious Return
After twelve and a half years, the author goes home.

Chris Ware 140 SKETCHBOOK
Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth
The masked man knows best.

DÉBUT FICTION

Marisa Silver 114 FICTION
"The Passenger"

David Schickler 130 FICTION
"The Smoker"

Akhil Sharma 144 FICTION
"Prosperity"

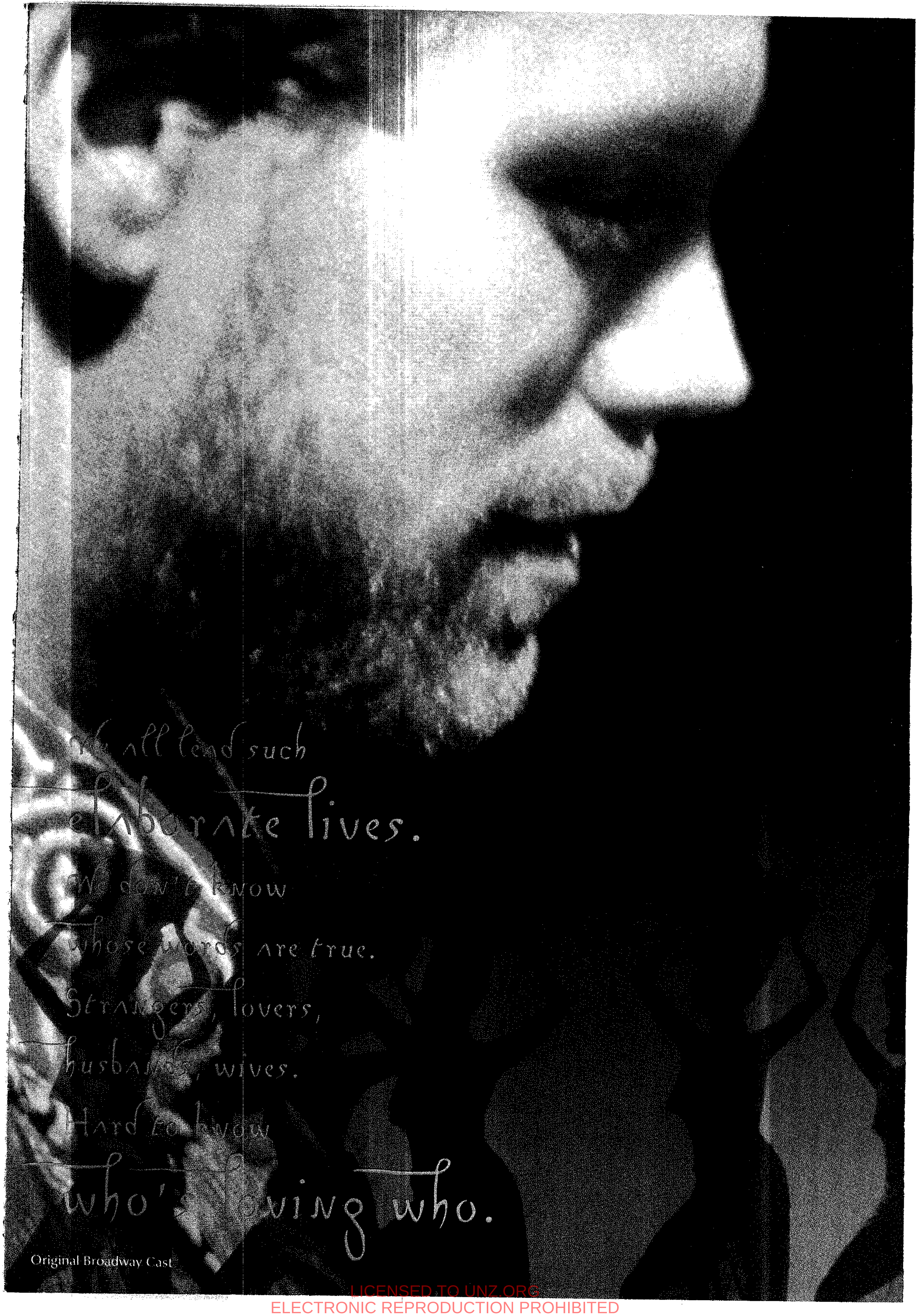
ZZ Packer 156 FICTION
"Drinking Coffee Elsewhere"

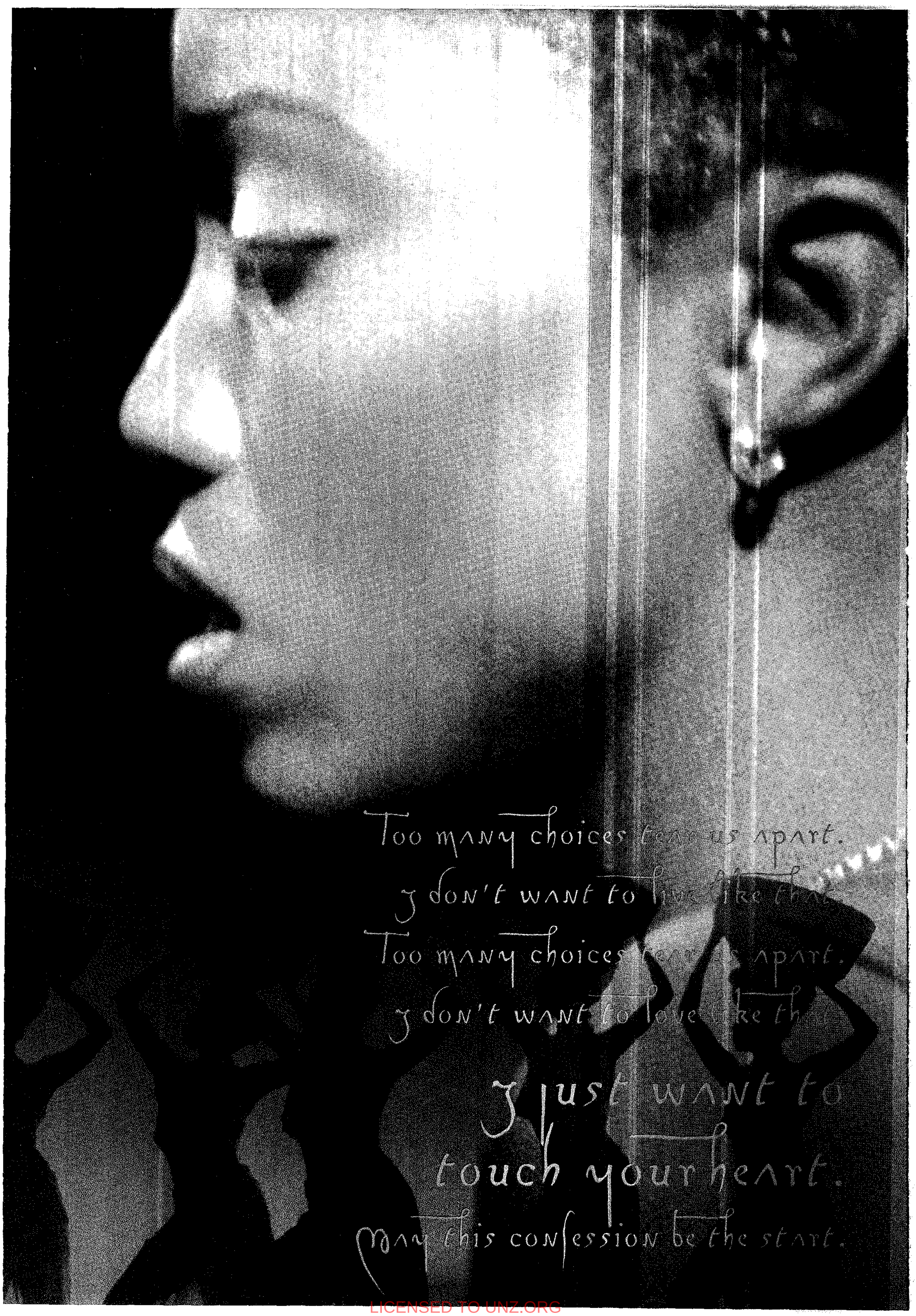
THE CRITICS

BOOKS

Adam Gopnik 172 *Five books by E. M. Cioran. Photographs by Richard Avedon.*

Continued on page 12


We all lead such
elaborate lives.
We don't know
whose words are true.
Strangers, lovers,
husbands, wives.
Hard to know
who's loving who.
Original Broadway Cast


Too many choices tear us apart.
I don't want to live like that.
Too many choices tear us apart.
I don't want to love like that.
I just want to touch your heart.
May this confession be the start.

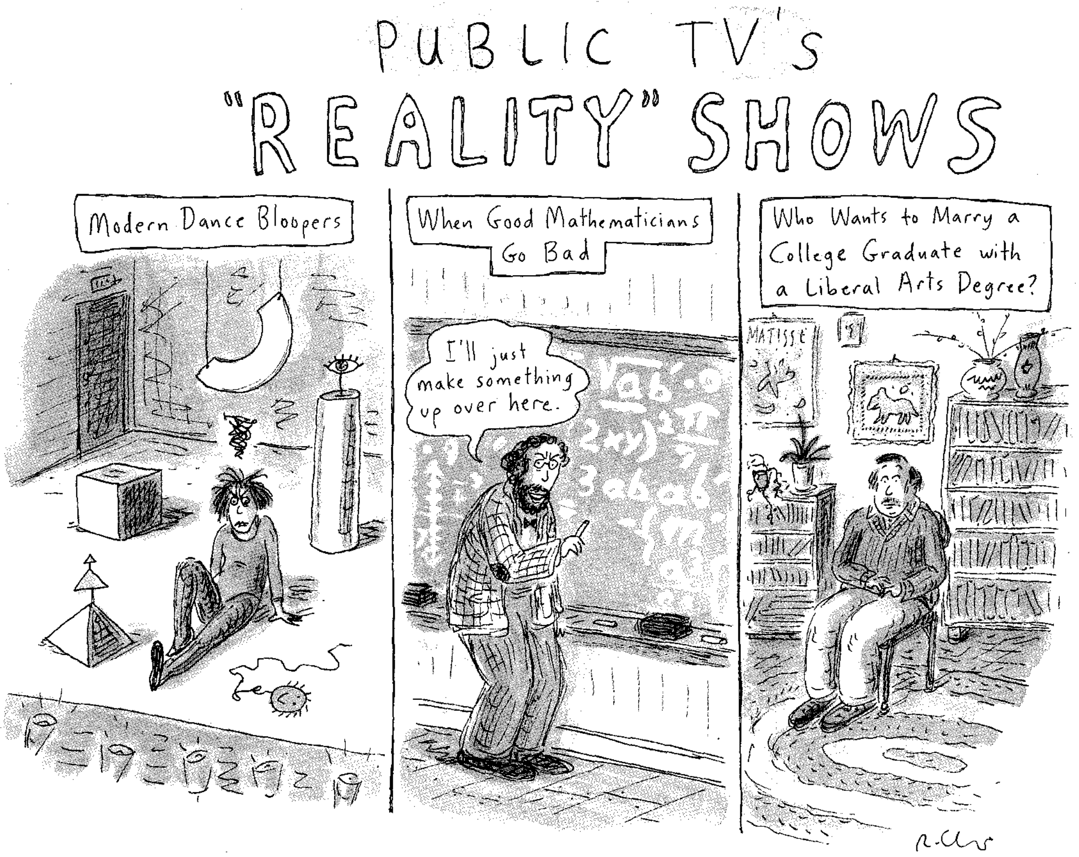
181 *First fictions.*
Joan Acocella 182 *Martin Amis's "Experience."*
Anthony Lane 187 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"Time Regained."

POEMS
Les Murray 100 "Succor"
Seamus Heaney 152 "Electric Light"

THE BACK PAGE
William Steig, Margaret Kemp Ross 190 "I Married My Dog"

COVER
R. Kenton Nelson "Poised"

DRAWINGS *Roz Chast, Lee Lorenz, William Hamilton, Mick Stevens, Harry Bliss, Barbara Smaller, Robert Mankoff, Liza Donnelly, Doug Reina, Charles Barsotti, Barry Blitt, Leo Cullum, Danny Shanahan, Robert Weber, Peter Steiner, John O'Brien, Edward Koren, Marisa Acocella, Frank Cotham, William Haefeli, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Paul Karasik, Michael Crawford*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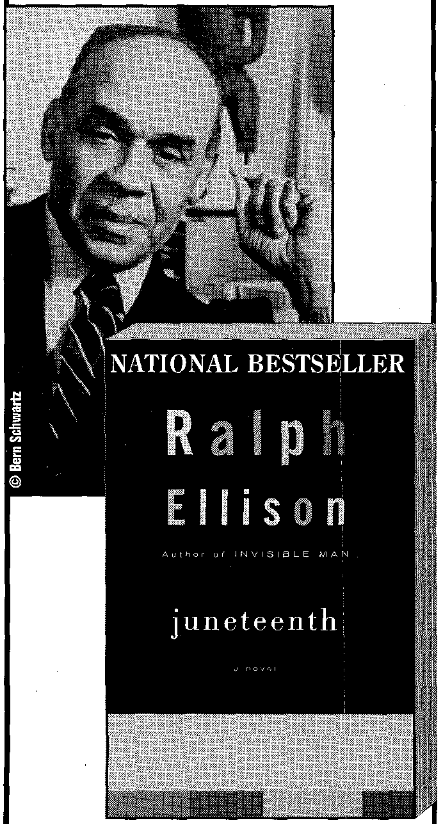

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CONTRIBUTORS

This summer's fiction issue features stories by four writers who have not yet published a book. Other début writers will appear in the magazine later this summer.

Marisa Silver ("The Passenger," p. 114) has directed feature films and is completing a collection of short stories.

David Schickler ("The Smoker," p. 130) is an English teacher and the drama director at the Harley School, in Rochester, New York, and is working on a novel.

Akhil Sharma ("Prosperity," p. 144), a New York-based investment banker, has won the O. Henry Award twice.

ZZ Packer ("Drinking Coffee Elsewhere," p. 156) is a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University and the recipient of a Whiting Award.

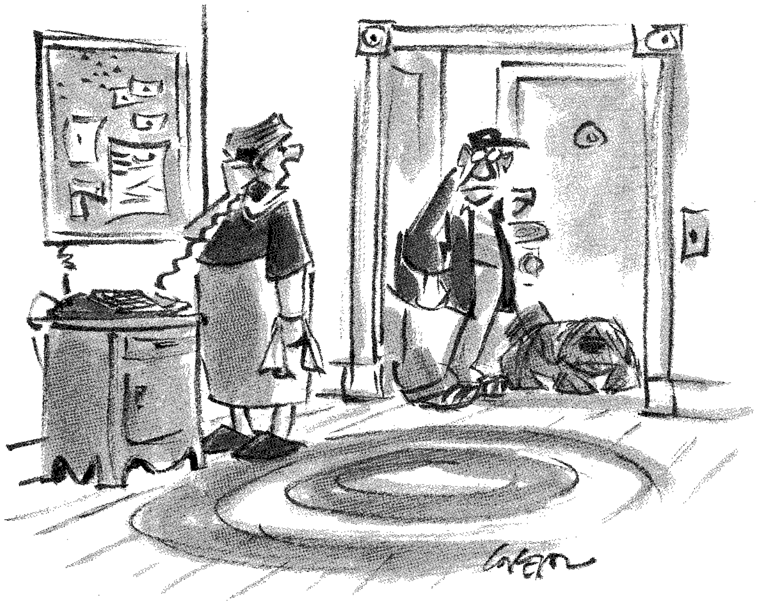
Salman Rushdie ("A Dream of Glorious Return," p. 94) is the author of seven novels, including, most recently, "The Ground Beneath Her Feet."

Margaret Kemp Ross (The Back Page, p. 190) graduates this month from the Middle School of the Convent of the Sacred Heart in New York City. This is her first published poem.

Stephen King ("On Impact," p. 78) is the author of the forthcoming "On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft."

Tobias Wolff ("In the Hay," p. 91) teaches English at Stanford University. His most recent book is "The Night in Question."

Andrea Artz (Photographs, pp. 115, 131, 145, 157) is a German photographer who now lives in New York; her work has been widely shown in Europe. ♦



"It's just Mayor Giuliani asking us to have a nice day."

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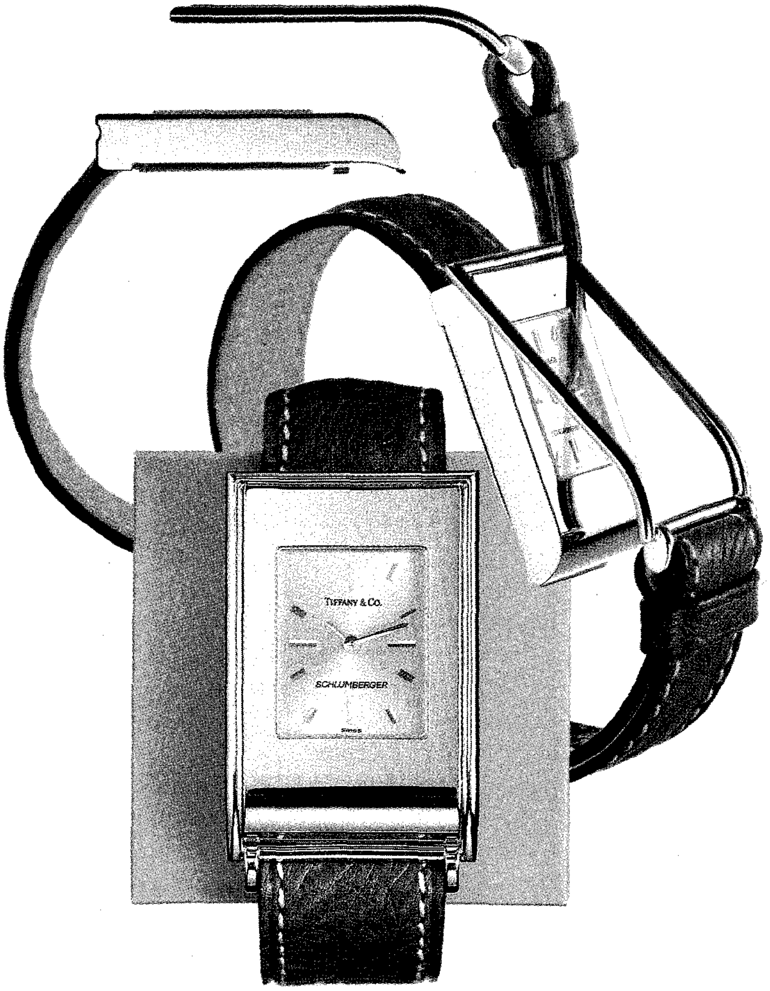
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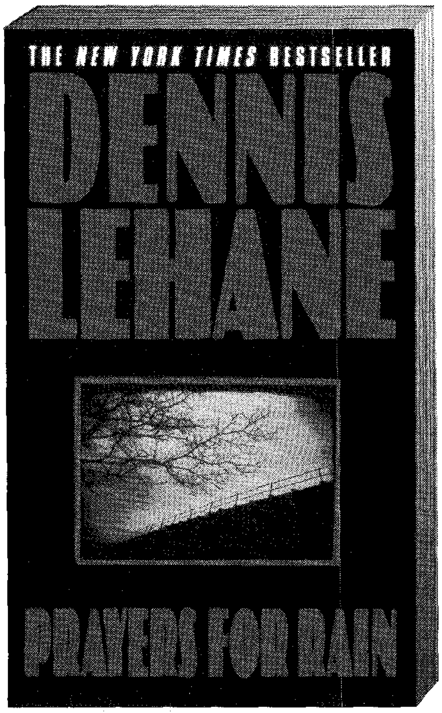
–*Chicago Tribune*



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FICTION AND FASCISM

Alexander Stille's "The Spy Who Failed" (May 15th) offers an effective presentation of new discoveries surrounding the novelist Ignazio Silone's alleged work for the Italian Fascist police. But, in Stille's view, those developments void Silone's "heroic image," and make "undercurrents of deceit and betrayal" paramount in his work. Those who previously read his novels "as straightforward denunciations of social injustice" should now marvel at the writer's ability to reinvent himself.

While Stille points out that there is no consensus on the nature and extent of Silone's involvement with the Fascist police, he seems to suggest that those who do not believe that Silone was a significant informant are refusing to see the obvious. But the obvious is not always the truth. As the author of two books about Silone, I have seen enough research on this subject to be sure that, if Silone had informed in the way that Stille suggests, he could have brought down the entire underground movement. This discrepancy cannot be explained away by labelling him "reluctant." More work is needed before we fully understand what happened, but, if we cannot ignore the autobiographical component in Silone's work, neither can we find proofs of guilt in the words uttered by his characters. Silone read the signs of history and decoded them for his readers, and left us much more than a fictionalized account of his own life story.

Maria Nicolai Paynter
Professor of Italian, Hunter College
New York City

DICKINSON DECIPHERED?

Permit me to offer another interpretation of the inscription on the back of the purported photograph of Emily Dickinson described in The Talk of the Town (May 22nd). "Emily Dickinson—/died/rec 1886" is shorthand for "Emily Dickinson, died and received into the arms of our Lord in Heaven, 1886." That was common phrasing in obituaries and family records of the period. One could intelligently speculate that the picture was once owned by a relative or friend of the poet.

Dennis Dalrymple
New York City

The alleged new photograph of Emily Dickinson looks little like the accompanying picture of the poet as a teen-ager. Fifteen or eighteen years cannot shorten a neck so appreciably, nor can time turn a flat nose pointy. In any case, by Dickinson's thirties she had taken to wearing white and was strong-willed enough to refuse the sort of get-up featured in the new photograph. What's more, when asked by her correspondent Thomas Higginson in July of 1862 if she had a picture of herself she demurred rather strongly: "Could you believe me—without? I had no portrait, now, but am small, like the Wren."

Gloria Frym
Professor of Poetics, New College of California
San Francisco, Calif.

THE SERVANTS' PROBLEM

Alma Guillermoprieto's "My Servant Problem" (May 8th) filled me with paroxysms of class rage. As a forty-one-year-old working-class man who grew up poor (that is, never having enough money for rent, rather than never having enough money for a servant), I've grown sick of watching people with money wring their hands and worry about the morality of hiring servants, and whether their servants love them, and how much working people deserve to be paid. Just understand that we don't love you, and that your money is always gained by our poverty and hard work, and that there is nothing noble about hiring somebody for pennies to do what you as an able-bodied person should be doing yourself.

Jeff Rose
Helena, Mont.

•

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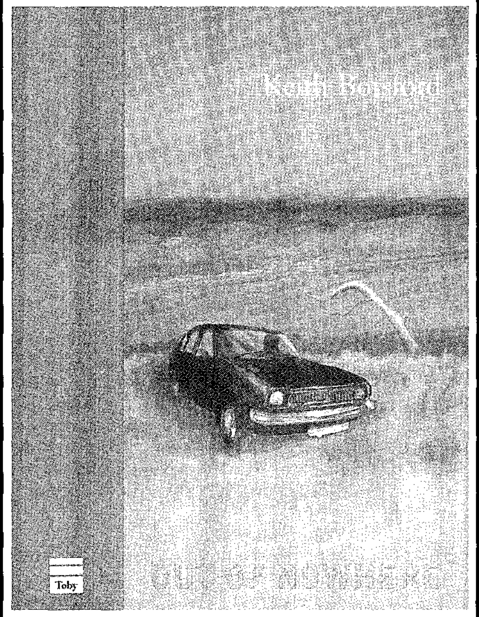

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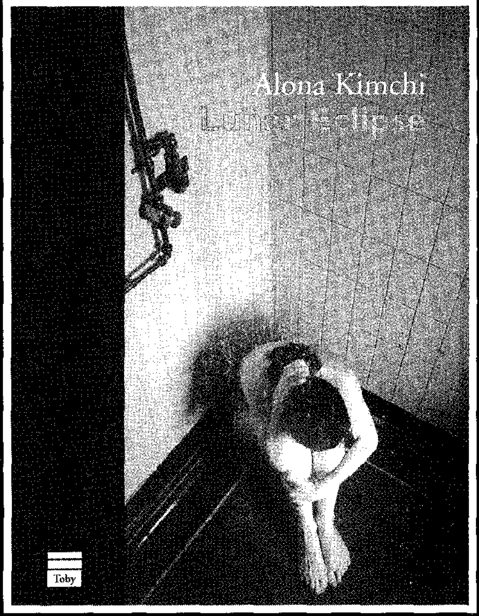

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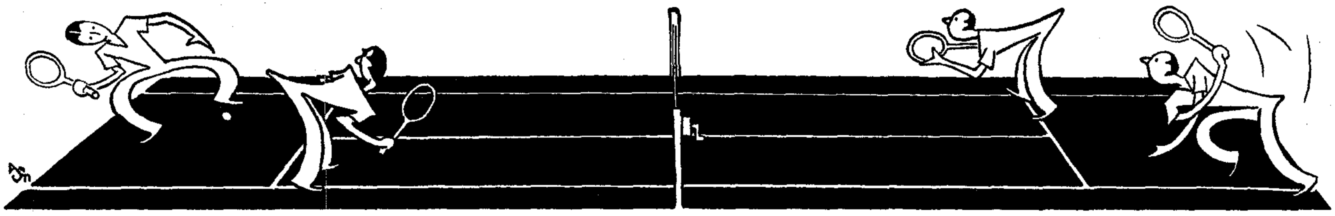


THE THEATRE
OPENINGS & PREVIEWS

Please call the phone number listed with the theatre for timetables and ticket information.

THE BUBBLY BLACK GIRL SHEDS HER CHAMELEON SKIN
A musical memoir by Kirsten Childs, which follows its heroine from Los Angeles in the sixties to New York in the nineties. In previews through June 18. Opens June 20 at 7. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 279-4200.)

CAPITOL STEPS
The musical-theatre troupe's latest political satire, "It Ain't Over 'til the First Lady Sings." Two previews on June 14. Opens June 15 at 8. (Douglas Fairbanks, 432 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.)

HIP-HOP THEATRE FESTIVAL
Two one-woman shows: "Surface Transit," by Sarah Jones, who portrays eight urban characters. Performances begin June 14 at 8:30. ♦ "Sistah Supreme," an autobiographical piece by Liza Colon-Zayas. Performances begin June 28 at 7:30. (P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., at 9th St. 477-5288.)

MACBETH
Kelsey Grammer and Diane Venora star in Shakespeare's tragedy, under the direction of Terry Hands. Two previews on June 14. Opens June 15 at 6:30. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

MEASURE FOR MEASURE
The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival begins its summer season. Previews June 21-23. Opens June 24 at 8. (Boscobel Restoration, Garrison, N.Y. For ticket information and directions, call 914-265-9575.)

NEIL SIMON'S HOTEL SUITE
An evening of one-acts taken from the playwright's three "Suite" plays. Two previews on June 14. Opens June 15 at 7:30. (Gramercy Theatre, 127 E. 23rd St. 307-4100.)

THE WINTER'S TALE
The New York Shakespeare Festival's first outdoor production of the season. Previews begin June 21. (Delacorte Theatre, Central Park near W. 81st St. For information about free tickets, which are required, call 539-8750.)

OPENED RECENTLY

AIDA
Disney's new musical—five years in the making and a product of Pharaonic expense—is, if not perfect, a lively, polished entertainment with bursts of joyful flamboyance worthy of its composer, Elton John. The two female leads—Heather Headley, as Aida, and Sherie René Scott, as Amneris—shine in their different ways, and Bob Crowley's brilliant sets give the show both visual dazzle and emotional resonance. Directed by Robert Falls. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/10/00.) (Palace, Broadway at 47th St. 307-4747.)

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			14	15	16	17
18	19	20	21	22	23	24
25	26	27				

AMADEUS
From London, a revival of Peter Shaffer's drama, starring Michael Sheen as Mozart and David Suchet as Salieri. Sir Peter Hall is the director. (Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

AND GOD CREATED GREAT WHALES
A composer with a degenerative disease struggles to finish an opera based on "Moby Dick," in a musical-theatre work written by Rinde Eckert and staged by the Foundry Theatre. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 924-0077. Closes June 25.)

ANONYMOUS
Chip Zien has the lead in a comedy by Glen Merzer, about a cloistered novelist whose life is turned upside down when he takes a job in advertising. (McGinn/Cazale, Broadway at 76th St. 279-4200. Closes June 25.)

THE BOMB-ITTY OF ERRORS
In this exuberant take on "The Comedy of Errors," the basic idea remains the same, but the action has been shifted to the hip-hop realm, and the four extravagantly talented writer-actors (who play all of the parts) make it seem altogether new. (45 Bleecker, 45 Bleecker St., at Lafayette St. 307-4100.)

THE BUTTER AND EGG MAN
Jean Cocteau Rep's staging of the 1925 George Kaufman comedy. (Bouwerie Lane Theatre, 330 Bowery, at Bond St. 677-0060. Closes June 25.)

CONTACT
The director and choreographer Susan Stroman's dance play, a triptych of simple stories about the various forms of human connection and the atmosphere of longing, is a big-hearted, witty crowd-pleaser. (10/18 & 10/25/99) (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 239-6200.)

COPENHAGEN
In Michael Frayn's play, which speculates on the controversial 1941 reunion of the two giants of quantum mechanics—the physicists Niels Bohr (Philip Bosco) and Werner Heisenberg (Michael Cumpsty)—the game of not knowing is elevated to an organizing principle. It is so meticulous, so admirable, and so grave that you want to tousle its well-kempt appearance and tell it to lighten up. Nevertheless, the director, Michael Blakemore, manages to make dynamic and suggestive an evening that consists of three actors (Blair Brown plays Margrethe Bohr) and three chairs. (4/24 & 5/1/00) (Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

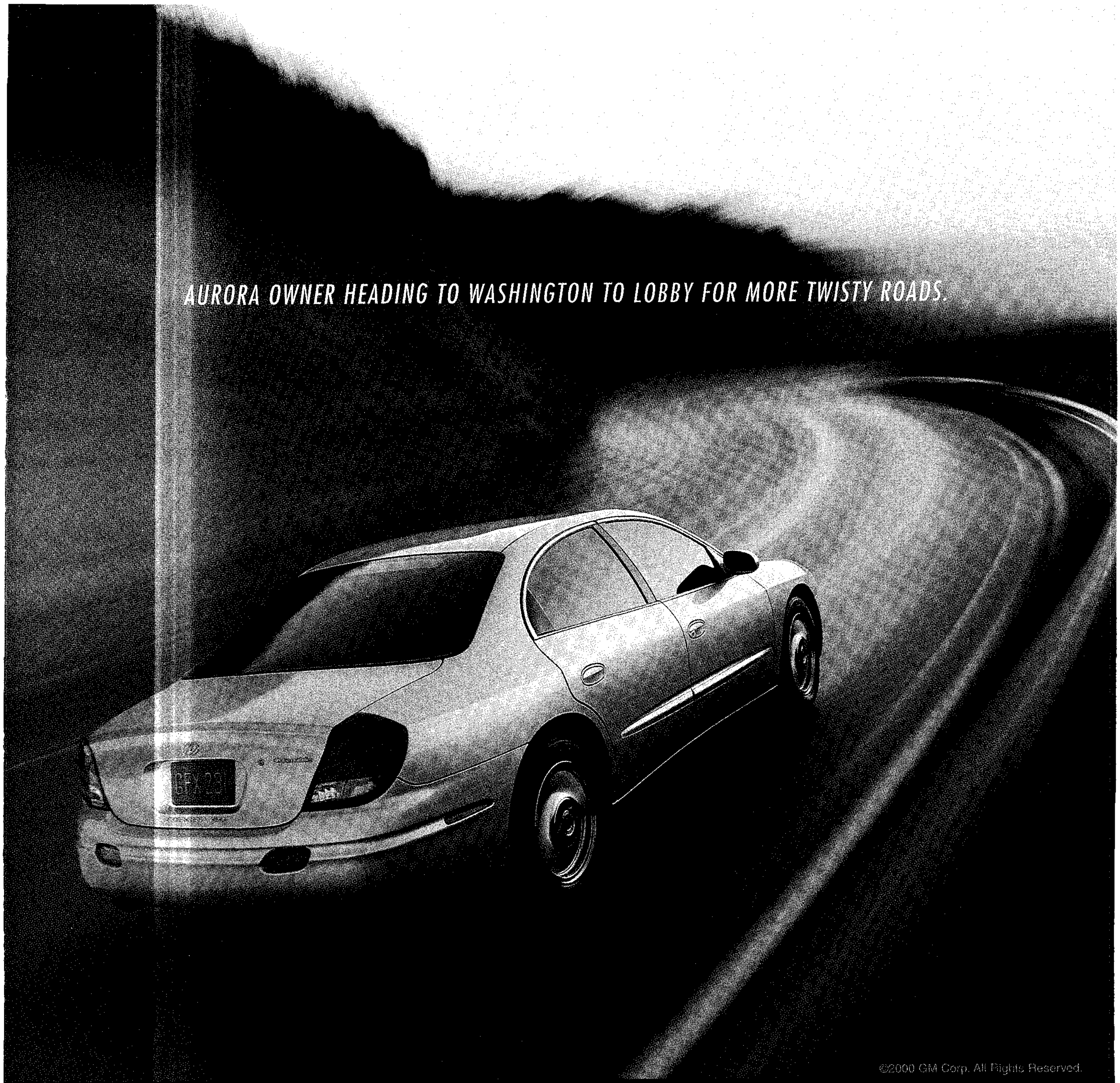
CURRENT EVENTS
A liberal California senatorial candidate returns to his Connecticut home, in a new drama by the actor and playwright David Marshall Grant ("Snakebit"). (Manhattan Theatre Club, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212.)

THE DESIGNATED MOURNER
Through a series of intercut monologues, this extraordinary, beautifully written play by Wallace Shawn imagines a time in the future when the contemporary culture will have lost its historical memory and literary heritage and taken up residence in a state of barbarous, mindless sensation. Alternately coruscating and hilarious, the tale is narrated by Shawn with pitch-perfect irony, and Deborah Eisenberg and Larry Pine give strong performances as remnants from the world of privilege and taste which Shawn is at once mocking and mourning. Well directed by André Gregory and memorably staged on the top floors of a derelict men's club deep in the financial district. An important theatrical event. (5/15/00) (21 South William Street. 532-8887.)

THE DIRECTOR
The playwright Nancy Hasty asks whether acting (which is essentially lying) can reveal deeper truth. It's a smart play, and, though it's not entirely satisfying intellectually, John Shea's brilliant performance as the director almost makes it seem so. (Arclight, 152 W. 71st St. 279-4200.)

DIRTY BLONDE
Mae West's flirty and dirty persona is the subject of a cunningly written, raffish evening conceived by the writer-actress Claudia Shear and the director James Lapine. Mae's story is recounted with brio by two fans—Jo (Shear, who doubles winningly as Mae) and Charlie (the superb Kevin Chamberlin). The success of the play rests not on the louche facts of West's life but on the intersection of her story with the sweetness of the evolving relationship between the two lost souls who narrate it. (2/7/00) (Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

FOR COLORED GIRLS WHO HAVE CONSIDERED SUICIDE WHEN THE RAINBOW IS ENUF
Ntozake Shange's 1974 choreopoem, directed by George Faison. (American Place, 111 W. 46th St. 239-6200.)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JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR
This misguided Broadway revival of Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1971 musical version of the Saviour's last days on earth starts out by asking the tantalizing question "What's the buzz?" but never delivers a theatrically satisfying answer. Still, with its archaic whiff of right-wing outrage and its singable seventies-rock score, it's fun for nostalgia's sake. (Ford Center for the Performing Arts, 213 W. 43rd St. 307-4100.)

JITNEY
August Wilson's play—a reworked and expanded version of a 1979 one-act—is set in a car-service station in 1977, in a part of Pittsburgh which is being demolished faster than it's being renovated. In this atmosphere of decay, Wilson's characters struggle with themselves and with each other to find some hope, and some peace, amidst the rubble. The cast of nine wonderful actors (almost all of whom have appeared in at least one of Wilson's other plays), including Stephen McKinley Henderson, Barry Shabaka Henley, and Paul Butler, hit perfect notes of collision and cohesion, and turn what might otherwise be a draggy experience (the play runs to nearly three hours) into a riveting and moving one. Directed by Marion McClinton, with a tremendous assist from David Gallo's evocative set. (Second Stage, 307 W. 43rd St. 246-4422.)

KISS ME, KATE
With all its admirable expertise and its various delights, this production of the Cole Porter musical is oddly earthbound: it comes down to the vexing issue of chemistry. The leads, Marin Mazzie and Brian Stokes Mitchell, are expert players, but they are not—in the true meaning of the words—star performers. (11/29/99) (Martin Beck, 302 W. 45th St. 239-6200.)

THE LARAMIE PROJECT
A drama about the murder of gay-hate victim Matthew Shepard, written and directed by Moisés Kaufman. (Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 307-4100.)

LYDIE BREEZE
John Guare has rewritten his two 1982 plays, "Lydie Breeze" and "Gardenia," as a drama in two parts, presented in rotating repertory. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 460-5475.)

A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN
A solid and satisfying revival of Eugene O'Neill's 1943 drama. Gabriel Byrne's performance, as James Tyrone, an alcoholic actor who returns to his Connecticut farm from New York to unburden himself in the arms of the earth mother Josie (Cherry Jones), is something to see. Daniel Sullivan directed. (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 239-6200. Closes June 18.)

THE MUSIC MAN
The first thing that has to be said about this delightful revival of Meredith Willson's 1957 musical, which is under the direction of Susan Stroman, is that it has magnificently solved the Robert Preston Problem in the person of Craig Bierko, who is making his Broadway début in the role of Professor Harold Hill—the role that Preston, of course, immortalized in the original show and in the 1962 movie. Bierko talks and moves and sings with great confidence and charm, and he has the weight and presence on the stage that we associate with male musical stars of several decades ago. Bierko and Rebecca Luker, as Marion, the librarian, make a terrific couple, and Luker's sweet, warbly voice is just right for the era of parlor songs, in which the musical is set. The show hits us with the simplicity and seamlessness of a perfect fairy tale, and it puts music in its proper place—right up there with all the other miracles of life. (5/22/00) (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 307-4100.)

NATIONAL ASIAN AMERICAN THEATRE COMPANY
Presenting Chekhov's "The Harmfulness of Tobacco" and Christopher Fry's "A Phoenix Too Frequent." (Mint, 311 W. 43rd St. 718-623-1672. Closes June 17.)

NIGHT OF THE ASSASSINS
The Cuban playwright José Triana's 1965 drama, in which three siblings act out the murder of their parents. (INTAR 53, at 508 W. 53rd St. 279-4200.)

"Anonymous," a comedy by Glen Merzer, at the McGinn/Cazale.

VICTOR JUHASZ

THE PICTURE
Tony Torn stars in a new translation of Ionesco's play, staged by the Sanctuary Theatre Workshop. (Cha, 135 W. 42nd St. 206-7188. Closes July 1.)

PROOF
The young playwright David Auburn's drama stars Mary-Louise Parker as the daughter of a brilliant University of Chicago mathematician, whose life and career began to disintegrate in his mid-twenties, when he became mentally ill. Parker's character—whom we meet on her twenty-fifth birthday, the day before her father's funeral—appears to have similar gifts and, possibly, similar troubles, and Parker skillfully and believably delivers the smart and sullen, insolent and indolent goods, as she has done many times in the past. Auburn has taken on some biggies here: what the link may be between genius and mental instability, why it is that lives get stuck, and how elusive the truth of the matter—any matter—can be. For all that, you wish the play were a little richer, a little less simply resolved; but its level of accomplishment and the realness of its characters show that Auburn has both depth and a voice. Directed by Daniel Sullivan. (Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 581-1212. Closes July 9.)

THE REAL THING
Revived here with an excellent cast (especially Stephen Dillane) and subtle direction by David Leveaux, Tom Stoppard's 1984 drama remains the wittiest, sharpest look at that twisted thing called love to come around in decades. (Ethel Barrymore, 243 W. 47th St. 239-6200.)

THE RIDE DOWN MT. MORGAN
"Why have I been condemned?" the aptly named bigamist Lyman Felt (Patrick Stewart) asks, rather whinily, toward the end of Arthur Miller's latest play, an examination of the seeming impossibility of fidelity, or, at least, lifelong marriage. And you trust that Lyman is truly in the dark about how he could be convicted of having love for two women. The problem with Miller's project is that his lying Lyman is no longer in love with his first wife at all, and he seems to have only lust for the second. (Ambassador, 219 W. 49th St. 239-6200.)

ROMEO AND JULIET
The Moonwork Theatre Company's version of Shakespeare's play. (Connelly Theatre, 220 E. 4th St. 279-4200. Closes June 30.)

SATURDAY NIGHT FEVER
John Travolta is not easy to replace, nor are the ashes of disco fever likely to reignite, as this show, based on the 1977 movie, demonstrates. (Minskoff, 45th St. west of Broadway. 307-4100.)

STRAIGHT-JACKET
A nineteen-fifties Hollywood actor marries a studio owner's secretary in order to conceal his homosexuality, in a comedy by Richard Day. (Playhouse 91, at 316 E. 91st St. 307- 4100.)

SWING!
No plot, just a hot band, Olympic-class dancers, and major panties—this show, a tribute to swing and its dance counterpart, the Lindy (mother of the jitterbug), lives up to its name. Directed and choreographed by Lynne Taylor-Corbett. (St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 239-6200.)

TRUE WEST
A sensational revival of Sam Shepard's 1980 play, directed by Matthew Warchus. It's a droll tall tale of sibling rivalry, in which an intrusive, beer-swilling outlaw named Lee and his brother, Austin, a put-upon Ivy League screenwriter, face off in their vacationing mother's tidy modern kitchen. John C. Reilly's roaring, as Lee, and Philip Seymour Hoffman's repressed hostility, as Austin, make for a wonderful contrast and a satisfyingly equal battle of wills, but when the actors switch roles (every few performances), Hoffman's derelict eyes, slurred sea-dog voice, and preternatural comic skills make the contest entertaining but lopsided. Josh Brolin and Elias Koteas take over for Mr. Hoffman and Mr. Reilly beginning June 21. (3/27/00) (Circle in the Square, 50th St. west of Broadway. 239-6200.)

WHEN THEY SPEAK OF RITA
Daisy B. Foote's drama, about a discontented housewife in rural New Hampshire. (Primary Stages, 354 W. 45th St. 333-4052. Closes June 25.)

LONG RUNS

ANNIE GET YOUR GUN
Marquis, Broadway at 45th St. 307-4100.

BLUE MAN GROUP/TUBES
Astor Place Theatre, 434 Lafayette St. 254-4370.

CABARET
Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 239-6200.

CHICAGO
Shubert, 225 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

THE COUNTESS
Lamb's, 130 W. 44th St. 997-1780.

DAME EDNA: THE ROYAL TOUR
Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 239-6200. Closes July 2.

DINNER WITH FRIENDS
Variety Arts, 110 Third Ave., at 14th St. 239-6200.

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THE FANTASTICKS
Sullivan Street Playhouse, 181 Sullivan St., at Bleecker St. 674-3838.

FORBIDDEN BROADWAY
Stardust, Broadway at 51st St. 239-6200.

FOSSE
Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

FULLY COMMITTED
Cherry Lane Theatre, 38 Commerce St. 239-6200.

JACKIE MASON: MUCH ADO ABOUT EVERYTHING
Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

JEKYLL & HYDE
Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

THE LION KING
New Amsterdam, 214 W. 42nd St. 307-4100.

LES MISÉRABLES
Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 239-6200.

MISS SAIGON
Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 239-6200.

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS
John Houseman, 450 W. 42nd St. 239-6200.

PERFECT CRIME
Duffy, 1553 Broadway, at 46th St. 695-3401.

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Majestic, 245 W. 44th St. 239-6200.

RENT
Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 921-8000.

STOMP
Orpheum, 126 Second Ave., at St. Marks Pl. 477-2477.

THE VAGINA MONOLOGUES
Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 239-6200.

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
Final performances of the season. June 14 at 8: "2 & 3 Part Inventions," "Opus 19/The Dreamer," and "I'm Old Fashioned." ♦ June 15 at 8: "Donizetti Variations," "Liebeslieder Walzer," and "Triptych." ♦ June 16 at 8: "Coppélia." ♦ June 17 at 2: "Opus 19/The Dreamer," "Liebeslieder Walzer," and "Fearful Symmetries." ♦ June 17 at 8: "The Chairman Dances," "Todo Buenos Aires," "Slonimsky's Earbox," the première of "Harmonielehre," choreographed by Peter Martins, and "Fearful Symmetries." ♦ June 18 at 3: "Mozartiana," "Harmonielehre," and "Chaconne." ♦ June 20 at 8: "Donizetti Variations," the première of "Appalachia Waltz," choreographed by Miriam Mahdaviani, and "Fearful Symmetries." ♦ June 21 at 8: "Donizetti Variations," "The Cage," "Todo Buenos Aires," and "I'm Old Fashioned." ♦ June 22 at 8: "The Chairman Dances," "Sonatas and Interludes," "Opus 19/The Dreamer," and "Vienna Waltzes." ♦ June 23 at 8: "The Chairman Dances," "Todo Buenos Aires," "Appalachia Waltz," and "Chaconne." ♦ June 24 at 2: "Summerspace," "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux," "Harmonielehre," and "Vienna Waltzes." ♦ June 24 at 8: "Mozartiana," "The Cage," "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux," and "Vienna Waltzes." ♦ June 25 at 3: "Fearful Symmetries," "Appalachia Waltz," and "Liebeslieder Walzer." (New York State Theatre. 870-5570.)

AMERICAN BALLET THEATRE
June 14 at 2 and 8 and June 15 at 8: "Swan Lake." ♦ June 16 at 8 and June 17 at 2: "Jardin aux Lilas" and "La Sylphide." ♦ June 17 at 8: "Pas des Déesses" and "La Sylphide." ♦ June 19-20 and June 22 at 8 and June 21 at 2 and 8: "The Taming of the Shrew." ♦ June 23 and June 26-27 at 8 and June 24 and June 28 at 2 and 8: "La Bayadère." (Metropolitan Opera House. 362-6000. Through July 1.)

PARSONS DANCE COMPANY
David Parsons, who has been splitting his company's choreographic duties with Robert Battle lately, presents the second program of his two-week engagement. The final week features the première of Battle's "Dementia" and the return of Parsons' "Caught," in which flashing lights repeatedly capture the performer mid-leap in such a fashion that the dancer appears to fly. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 242-0800. June 13-16 at 8, June 17 at 2 and 8, and June 18 at 2 and 7:30.)

BEBE MILLER COMPANY
The five-member ensemble performs "Verge," a work in progress. Miller also presents the solo "Rhythm Studies." (Danspace Project, St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie, Second Ave. at 10th St. 674-8194. June 15-17 at 8:30 and June 18 at 7:30.)

40 UP
This seniors' tour of downtown dance sports an impressive list of talent, including Heidi Latsky, Jody Oberfelder, Amos Pinhasi, and Alice Tierstein. This time out, the twenty-six-member troupe presents new work by Zvi Gotheiner, Claire Porter, and Faye Driscoll. (St. Mark's In-the-Bouwerie. 674-8194. June 22-25 at 8:30.)

CENTRAL PARK SUMMERSTAGE
Elizabeth Streb/Ringside perform "Action Heroes," and the Stilt Dancers of MFOA offer vertically enhanced versions of traditional West African dance. (Rumsey Playfield, mid-Park at 72nd St. June 23 at 8:30. No tickets necessary.)

"THE ORCHID SHOW"
The Neta Dance Company's three-part, evening-length work, choreographed by Neta Pulvermacher, about orchids and the fanaticism they inspire. "River of Orchids" is a solo for Maile Okamura as a wandering swamp flower; "Apple Venus" is a suite of dances; and the title work is a mini-opera, narrated by a passionate orchid cultivator and soap-opera star. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 255-5793. June 15-17 at 8 and June 18 at 3 and 8.)

"SOULS OF OUR FEET DANCE FESTIVAL"
A series of dance showcases, curated by Ron Brown and Marlies Yearby. June 17-18 at 8: Writers and choreographers collaborate on new works about black gay life for "Toenails of Steel & Ruby Red Text." ♦ June 23-24 at 8: New pieces by Paz Tanjuaquio and Paz Danz Productions, Arthur Aviles and his Typical Theatre, and Nia Love of Blacksmith's Daughter Dance Theatre. ♦ June 25 at 2: "Juxtapower," a preview of a full-length commissioned work, by the South African choreographer Sduduzo Nunu. (Triangle Theatre, Long Island University, Flatbush and DeKalb Aves. 718-875-9710.)

"3 POINT JUNCTURE"
Four choreographers—Yanira Castro, Pam Tanowitz, and Tiffany Mills and Ursula Payne—from three companies who last year joined forces in an administrative alliance, present their first concert, with premières from each troupe. (Tribeca Performing Arts Center, 199 Chambers St. 346-8510. June 15-17 at 8.)

"VELO/CITY"
The three suit-jacketed performers of the Toronto-based Parallel Exit company depict the drill-team precision of office life through vaudeville shtick and acrobatic routines. (Walkerspace, 46 Walker St. 662-1080. June 14-18 and June 21-24 at 8:30. Through July 2.)

Susana Baca, at Joe's Pub.

OUT OF TOWN

JACOB'S PILLOW DANCE FESTIVAL
June 21-23 at 8, June 24 at 2 and 8, and June 25 at 2: Garth Fagan Dance. ♦ June 22-23 at 8:15 and June 24-25 at 5: RhythMEK. (Becket, Mass. For information about tickets, call 413-243-0745.)

"PURE MOTION"
Marcelo Gomes, Gillian Murphy, Desmond Richardson, and a lineup of dancers from Paul Taylor, Dendy Dance, Momix, Monte/Brown, and the American Ballet Theatre pool their talents in a benefit for Dancers Responding to AIDS. (The Theatre at East Hampton High School, East Hampton, Long Island. For information about tickets, call 212-840-0770.)

NIGHT LIFE
FESTIVALS

JVC JAZZ FESTIVAL
Never has the JVC Jazz Festival seemed less hip, arriving, as it does this week, on the heels of the Bell Atlantic Jazz Festival's overflowing roster of cutting-edge performers and the East Village's Vision Festival. But what the JVC fest—the current incarnation of producer George Wein's long-standing annual jazz catchall—has lost in modishness, it's gained in importance: the fundamentals of jazz are in urgent need of celebration, and Wein's festival affirms the essential roots of the music, with a program that concentrates on swing, bop, blues, vocals, and Latin-flavored music. Ever since the early nineteen-fifties, the indefatigable Wein, who is now eighty-one, has helped foster some of jazz's most creative periods. His job now is to remind us how sweet it all was. (All shows listed below are at 8. For more information, call 501-1390.)

JVC: TRIBUTES
Two of jazz's most idiosyncratic guitarists, Charlie Byrd, an acoustic master, and George Van Eps, a virtuoso of the eight-stringed guitar, are fêted by **Gene Bertoncini, Howard Alden,** and others. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. June 14.) ♦ Robert Johnson's scarifying blues will sound just as chilling today as they did more than half a century ago as various bluesmen reëxamine the master's legacy, including Johnson's contemporaries (**Honeyboy Edwards** and Johnson's stepson, **Robert Jr. Lockwood**, both born in 1915), and his younger artistic progenies (**Chris Whitley** and **John Hammond, Jr.**). (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. June 17.) ♦ Some of the most ravishing writing for jazz orchestra and soloist—Gil Evans' and Miles Davis's collaborations on their classic "Porgy and Bess" and "Sketches of Spain"—will be revisited by trumpeter **Jon Faddis** and the **Maria Schneider Orchestra.** (Carnegie Hall. June 18.) ♦ **"Bags' Groove,"** featuring friends of Milt Jackson. Everyone will be turning out to honor Jackson, the Modern Jazz Quartet's vibraphone virtuoso, who died last year. (Symphony Space. June 19.) ♦ **"From Spirituals to Swing,"** a celebration of the legendary 1938 and 1939 concerts organized by John Hammond, Sr., in Carnegie Hall. Swing, in its many

CHRISTIAN CLAYTON

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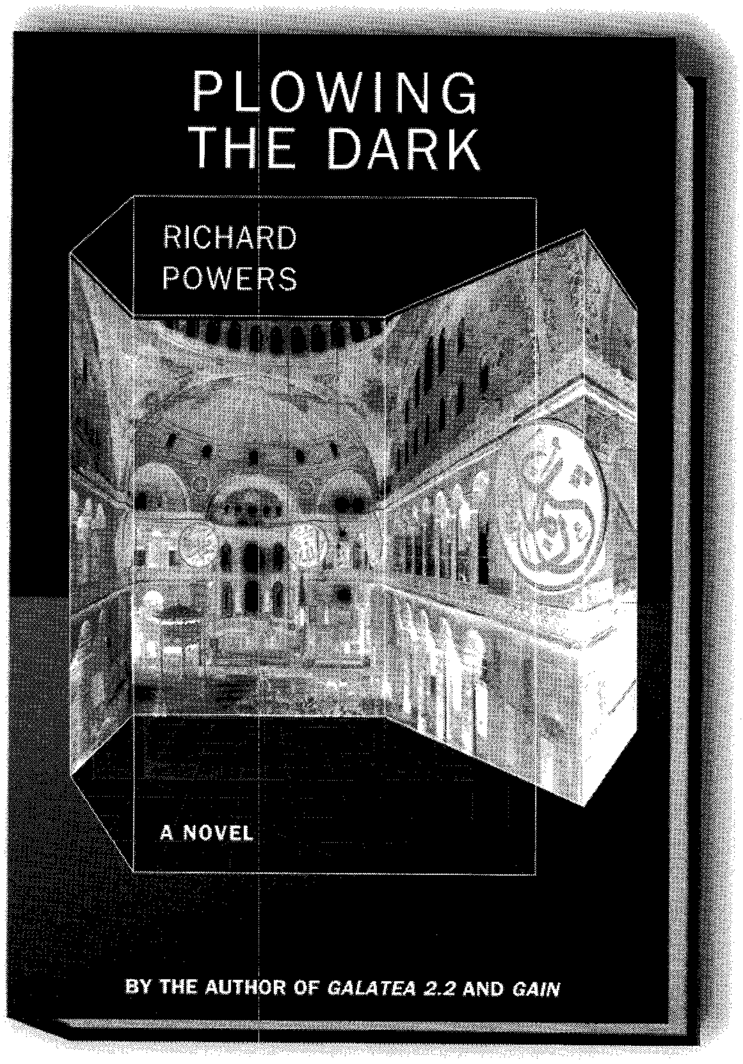


"Mention Richard Powers's name to other writers and see them get that faraway look in their eyes: They are calculating **the eventual reach of his influence."** —Sven Birkerts, *Esquire*

"**Powers's dramatic prose** and his intellectual reach makes [his characters'] symbolic connection more than enough to propel the novel toward its moving close."

—*Publishers Weekly,* starred review

"**One of the finest efforts** from the massively gifted Powers . . . as two disparate situations . . . whorl together in a heartwarming fusion." —**Kirkus Reviews*

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX

guises, is the thing at this inclusive performance that pulls together everyone from the **Count Basie Orchestra** to **Don Byron** and **Dianne Reeves.** Of special historical interest is the fact that bluesman Robert Johnson was scheduled to appear on the 1938 bill, but was poisoned and died before he could make the trip. (Carnegie Hall. June 22.)

JVC: VOCALISTS

Diana Krall, jazz's most successful singer, sold out this engagement long ago. Surprised? (Supper Club, 240 W. 47th St. June 21.) ♦ **Ray Charles.** Hit the road, Jack: Uncle Ray is alive and kicking, and ever ready to defend his kingdom. With **Regina Carter.** (Avery Fisher Hall. June 23.) ♦ **Cassandra Wilson** and **Cesaria Evora.** Two goddesses of song. (Carnegie Hall. June 23.) ♦ **Aretha Franklin.** The now-and-future Queen of Soul sounds better than she has in years—a frightening thought. With the **Stanley Turrentine** quintet. (Avery Fisher Hall. June 24.) ♦ **Dianne Reeves.** Diana Krall can't carry the whole jazz vocal show alone, can she? Maybe Reeves can give her a run for the money. With the **Herbie Hancock Group.** (Beacon Theatre, Broadway at 74th St. June 24.)

JVC: LATIN JAZZ

The hit of last year's festival was the solo performance of singer and guitarist **João Gilberto,** the godfather of bossa nova. History may well repeat itself. (Carnegie Hall. June 16.) ♦ **Pablo Ziegler,** former pianist for Astor Piazzolla, is upholding the Argentine tango-master's legacy. Jazzmen **Joe Lovano** and **Gary Burton,** and a bevy of tango-dancers, including the smoldering **Diego Di Flaco,** will join Ziegler's ensemble. (Carnegie Hall. June 17.) ♦ **Rubén Blades,** with **Orquestra Aragón.** (Carnegie Hall. June 20.) ♦ Tito Puente's recent death has turned this into a tribute to the timbales king, and who better than salsa maestro **Eddie Palmieri** to be master of ceremonies at what promises to be a pungent jam session. (Carnegie Hall. June 24.)

JVC: AVANT-GARDE

In what will undoubtedly be a festival high point, **John Zorn** will present the world of Masada, his repertoire of Jewish-tinged jazz, pop, and classical melodies, brilliantly interpreted by a string quartet, a larger mixed-instrument ensemble, and a slashing quartet that includes Zorn on saxophone and Dave Douglas on trumpet. (Symphony Space. June 21.) ♦ The omnivorous trumpeter and composer **Dave Douglas** has an avalanche of musical ensembles, and has yet to strike out with any of them. Witness is his latest. (Symphony Space. June 22.) ♦ **Bill Frisell.** The most influential guitarist in jazz is moving further and further away from the genre lately. No matter. This exacting stylist can produce sounds with one note which hot-shot virtuosos can't achieve in a lifetime. With guitarist **Kelly Joe Phelps,** who plays smoldering, acoustic country blues. (Symphony Space. June 24.)

CONCERTS

NILE RODGERS AND CHIC

A historic event. In the late seventies, when Chic put out its consecutive masterpieces "C'est Chic" and "Risqué," the band almost single-handedly legitimized disco. With a seemingly bottomless supply of classic riffs (Nile Rodgers' guitar work on "Le Freak" is as recognizable as Jimmy Page's best work, and "Good Times" helped create the hip-hop genre when the Sugarhill Gang sampled it for "Rapper's Delight"), the band mixed a killer rhythm section (bassist Bernard Edwards and drummer Tony Thompson) with salacious female vocals. After they broke up, Rodgers went on to enjoy a successful career as a producer (his biggest successes: David Bowie's "Let's Dance" and Madonna's "Like a Virgin"); Edwards and Thompson helped Robert Palmer make "Addicted to Love." Edwards died tragically a few years ago while touring in Japan, but with Rodgers' guitar driving the groove the concert should be a reanimating experience. (Central Park SummerStage, Rumsey Playfield, mid-Park at 72nd St. 360-2777. June 15 at 7:30.)

DAVID BOWIE

While his commercial relevance shrinks with every new record (even though his recent efforts, particularly 1997's "Earthling," have been occasionally inspired), Bowie continues to excel as a fashion plate and Web innovator. His live shows are veritable symposia of rock history. (Roseland, 239 W. 52nd St. 307-7171. June 16-17 at 8.)

STEVE MILLER BAND
He's a joker, he's a smoker, he's a midnight toker, and he's still the honey-voiced éminence grise of seventies AM radio. Miller, even further enriched by the U.S. Post Office's decision to use "Fly Like an Eagle" in its commercials, brings his laid-back guitar music to this delightful band shell by the sea. With **Gov't Mule,** a bristling Allman Brothers offshoot led by slide guitarist Warren Haynes. (Jones Beach Theatre. 516-221-1000. June 16 at 8.)

R. L. BURNSIDE / HUBERT SUMLIN
Mississippi hill-country blues legend Burnside shares the stage with the inimitable sharp, scratchy guitar work of Sumlin, who played in Howlin' Wolf's band for twenty years. (Central Park SummerStage. June 17 at 3.)

SONIC YOUTH
The pioneering New York art-rock quartet has spent the better part of the past two decades sculpting, perfecting, and fine-tuning a shimmering wall of guitar noise. Leaders Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon can often be found performing live south of Houston Street, but that doesn't mean they've neglected their recording duties. Sonic Youth's latest album, "NYC Ghosts & Flowers," is another fine effort that finds the group integrating tape loops and sharp production by Jim O'Rourke into its trademark six-string storms. (Hammerstein Ballroom, Manhattan Center, 311 W. 34th St. 564-4882. June 17 at 8.)

ISRAEL (CACHAO) LOPEZ
The eighty-one-year-old Cuban bassist, who, with the help of his brother, Orestes, invented mambo back in the late thirties, gets a little help from **Carlos (Potato) Valdez,** a seventy-four-year-old conga master. With the **Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Big Band.** O'Farrill is one of the grand architects of Afro-Cuban jazz; his arrangements and his balance of steaming Latin rhythms, fervid bop improvisation, and resonant horn charts are still as bracing as ever. (Central Park SummerStage. June 18 at 3.)

NO DOUBT
Having mined gold from America's short-lived infatuation with ska ("Tragic Kingdom," which came out in 1995, has sold more than ten million copies), No Doubt has released "Return of Saturn," which suggests a debt to mid-period Pat Benatar. But the band is no flash in the pan. Gwen Stefani and company have been a live power for more than a decade, and their stage show is a well-honed aerobic production. (Jones Beach Theatre. June 19 at 7:30.)

LOU REED
Equipped with a rant for every entanglement, rock's high priest of leather and egg creams offers songs from his latest album, "Ecstacy," along with older hits. (Beacon Theatre. June 19 at 8.)

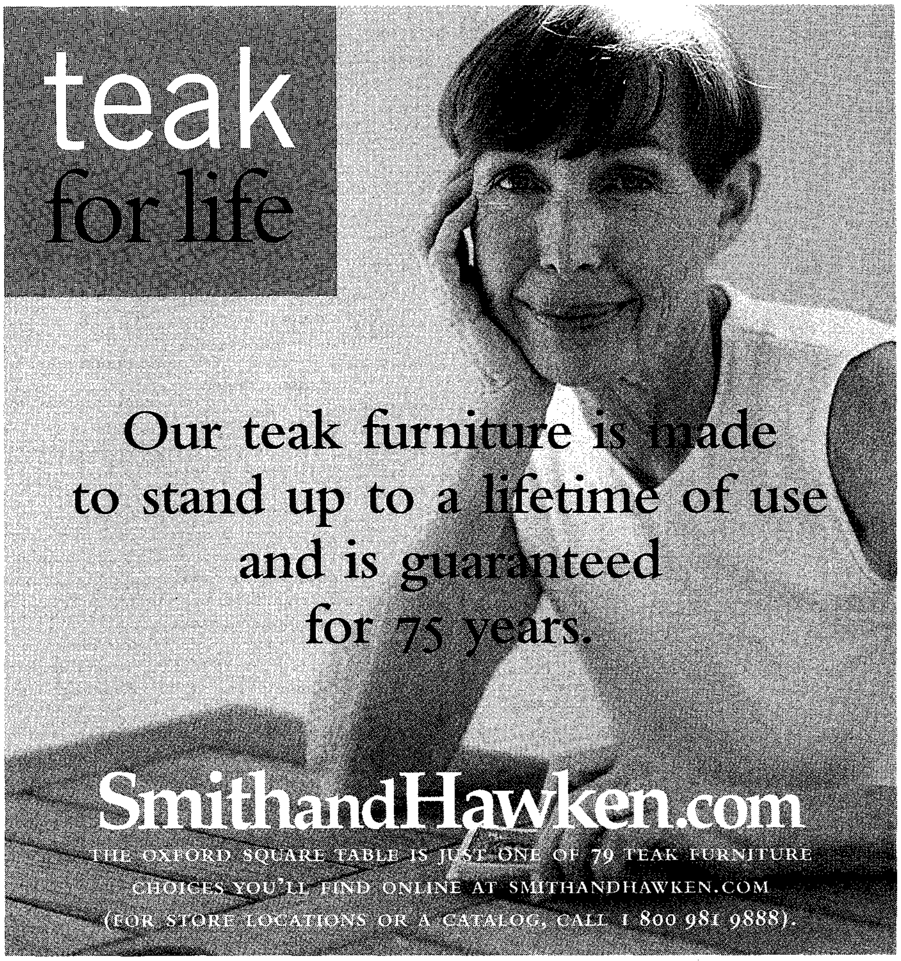
CURE
Robert Smith returns with his mascara-and-hair-spray Goth carnival. (Jones Beach Theatre. June 20 at 8.)

MILTON NASCIMENTO
One of Brazil's musical treasures, Nascimento has a voice like liquid silver and a preternatural gift for songcraft. The bad news is that he sometimes travels with a pop-styled band that turns his *rodizio* into plain old meat. Hope that he's on a tight budget; fewer accompanists means a better show. (Beacon Theatre. June 27 at 8.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BOTTOM LINE
15 W. 4th St., at Mercer St. (228-6300)—June 14: Country legend **Ray Price.** June 16: The dashing **Robyn Hitchcock,** the godfather of eighties neo-psychedelia, and the subject of a Jonathan Demme film, continues his surreal, Syd Barrett-inspired journey.



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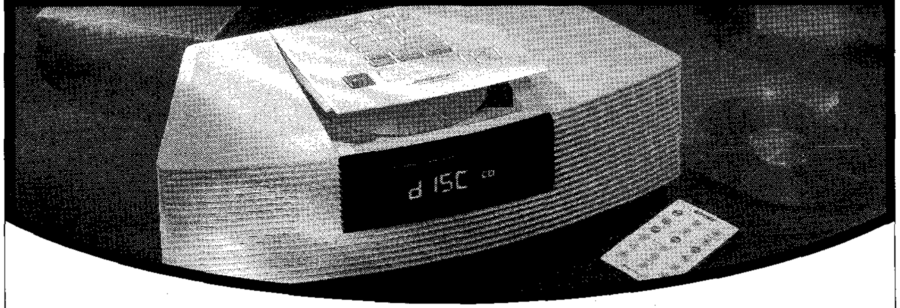

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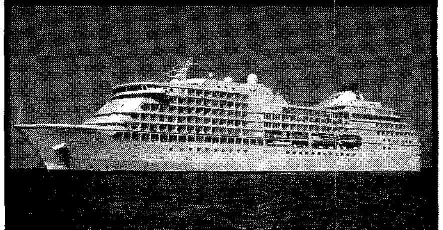
m/s Seven Seas Navigator



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2000 DEPARTURES

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OCT 3 — 13 NIGHTS — SYDNEY/AUCKLAND
OCT 16 — 14 NIGHTS — AUCKLAND/BALI
OCT 30 — 12 NIGHTS — BALI/HONG KONG
NOV 11 — 12 NIGHTS — HONG KONG/BALI
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DEC 2 — 20 NIGHTS — CAIRNS/LOS ANGELES

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BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (533-2111)—June 16: The glistening art rock of the **Super Furry Animals,** a band out of Cardiff, Wales, which started its career singing in Welsh but has converted to English in its conquest of the British charts. June 22: Led by Mark Oliver Everett (who calls himself E), the **Eels** have managed over the course of three astounding DreamWorks albums—"Beautiful Freak" (1996), "Electro-Shock Blues" (1998), and the just-released "Daisies of the Galaxy"—to create that rarest thing in contemporary pop: a unique sound. Everett, a cheerily demented depressive who favors titles like "Novocaine for the Soul" and who constructs tunes around shaggy bass lines and toy-piano frippery, offers a glimpse at what Brian Wilson might have been doing had he been born in the seventies. With the possible exception of Beck's, Everett's is the most creative rock vision currently being supported by a major label.

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (777-6800)—June 28: The **Violent Femmes.** Though most people associate their angst-ridden acoustic punk with junior high, those lucky enough to have seen them in concert know that the Femmes (whose original incarnation was made up of Juilliard-educated musicians) is one of the best live bands of the past two decades. Not since the demise of the Feelies has a group channelled the ghost of the Velvet Underground so effectively. ♦ The Swing Dance Society gathers here every Sunday, with sets from eight until midnight. For information on the Society, call 696-9737.

JOE'S PUB
425 Lafayette St. (539-8777)—June 14-16: **Susana Baca** is a Lima, Peru, native whose sensual music is a sumptuous mix of Spanish, Andean, and African influences. Baca sings with the dreamy power of a warm sea breeze; in a previous life she may easily have been a siren. To celebrate her new album, "Eco de Sombras," she's invited a few guests to join her longtime Peruvian band, including organist **John Medeski** and guitarist **Marc Ribot.**

KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (219-3055)—June 16: **Royal Trux** is an evolving group centered around Pussy Galore veteran Neil Hagerty and former Calvin Klein model Jennifer Herrema. Since they started recording together more than a decade ago, Hagerty and Herrema have battled drug addiction and overwhelming art-rock pretensions, which made their music a major challenge to the senses. But they've cleaned up their act, and in recent years they've demonstrated a command of many idioms, from rock opera to Southern rock. June 21: Producer **Wharton Tiers** stops by with his wildly inventive ensemble. June 21: The songs of **Rebecca Moore,** a veteran of the New York music, art, and theatre scenes (her father was Fluxus photographer Peter Moore), have idiosyncratic and arty structures, as well as many bright gems of Surrealist observation ("There's a dolphin leaning on a pinball machine"). She'll be playing with her ever-growing, eight-piece jamboree band, which includes a cello, a violin, and a vast assortment of toy instruments.

MAXWELL'S
1039 Washington St., Hoboken (201-798-0406)—June 16: His star is somewhat in decline these days, but the Kansas-born songwriter **Freedy Johnston** still remains one of our finest practitioners of the art. The clubs he plays have grown smaller, but that only means his talent can fill the room more easily. June 24: **NRBQ,** the world's greatest bar band.

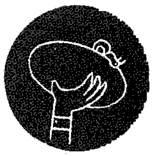
TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—June 16: If Hank Williams had been born in Israel, had come of age in the post-punk era, and had hung out with the art-school crowd, he might have turned out a bit like Eef Barzelay, the lanky front man of the quartet **Clem Snide.** Barzelay's front-porch ballads and lilting, whimsical waltzes are haunted by images of Dairy Queens and bus trips into the unknown, and the band, with its earthy emphasis on cello and upright bass, gives them just the right amount of hopeful melancholy.

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (581-3080)—June 15-17: The **Phil Woods** quintet. Woods breathes bop. An alto saxophonist who speaks fluent Parker while indulging his own alternately flashy and ripely romantic take on the music, Woods—forty years down the line—is playing better than ever. For three decades, he's also held down a coiled small band which is founded on Woods's now symbiotic relationship with his longtime drummer, **Bill Goodwin.** June 22-24: **Andy Summers.** The former Police guitarist, whose sly, rhythmically unpredictable phrasings always hinted at jazz leanings, came clean last year with "Green Chimneys," a set of revamped Thelonious Monk tunes. His latest project, "Myself When I Am Real," takes on Charles Mingus. Dining.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (475-8592)—Through June 18: The **Toots Thielemans** quartet. How does Thielemans maintain a competitive

TABLES FOR TWO



EIGHT MILE CREEK
240 Mulberry St. (431-4635)—New Yorkers never asked for Australian cuisine—most wouldn't know how to begin. So half the charm of this narrow, tin-ceilinged storefront eatery is its earnest need to be taken seriously. The affable, slightly scruffy Aussie staff are used to being asked silly questions about the kangaroo (yes, it's on the menu). "The emu is farmed, but the kangaroo is hunted by night. You can't build fences high enough," says a waiter. The kangaroo, flown in weekly from Melbourne, doesn't taste like chicken, but it does taste a bit like duck. And as with most food eaten on a dare, it's a bit of a letdown (just a couple of nicely charred medallions of tender red meat). Surprisingly, it's the only dish that smacks of even a bit of gimmickry.

Australia's big bird may not be rare ("I thought emu was extinct!" cries a young woman across the room), but it's served that way—as a carpaccio-style appetizer (emu has almost no fat content, and so is impossible to cook). It arrives in silky, unapologetically gamy slices, with asparagus, crunchy enoki mushrooms, and a black-truffle vinaigrette. Other starters include grilled sardines with coriander tabouli, strictly Mediterranean in flavor, and the more regional oyster pie, something you might eat while watching a rugby match on TV.

Eight Mile Creek has nailed the two real reasons to visit an Australian restaurant—the wine and the lamb. The wine list is packed with both stalwarts and oddities, and even the house Shiraz is a burly winner. Organic New South Wales loin of lamb, served with polenta and *maitake* mushrooms, has full-blown flavor and a velvety texture. A fine slab of seared arctic char, on a bed of risotto made with dried shrimp, soybeans, and preserved lemon, may have a vague Asian influence, but there's no question about the authenticity of the desserts. The Pavlova, the reigning national dessert, is a creamy meringue with pink peppercorns and passion-fruit curd. Other Aussie favorites are the sticky date pudding and the King Island blue-cheese plate. Still, if you walk away without a clear definition of Australian food, it's no surprise. The people in the kitchen aren't working from some outdated tourist guide; it's an adventure for them, too. "Did you ever eat a koala?" someone asks the waiter, who chooses, this time, to ignore the question. (Open Tuesdays through Fridays for dinner only, weekends for lunch and dinner. Entrées $17-$23.)

—*Owen Phillips*

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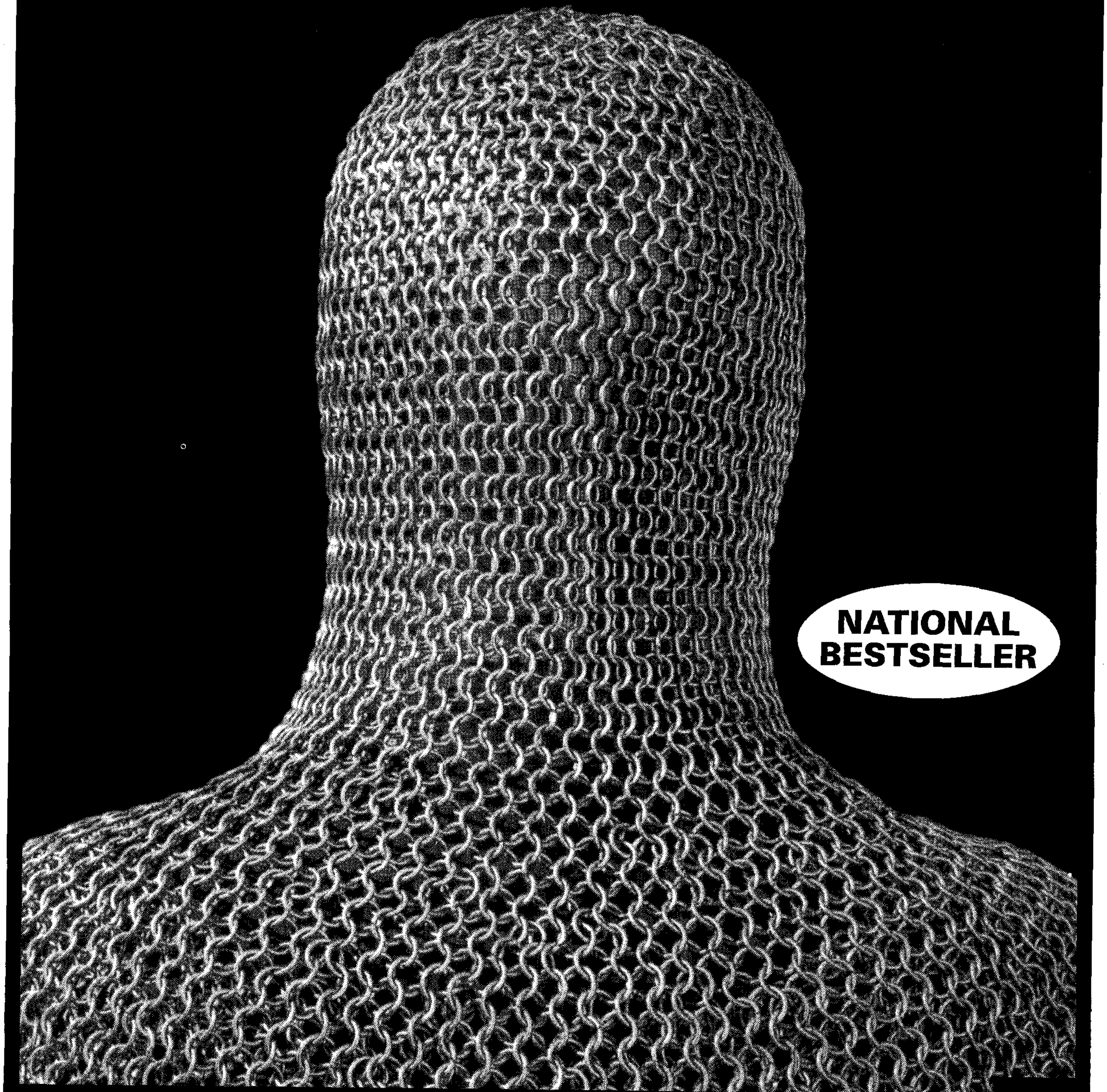
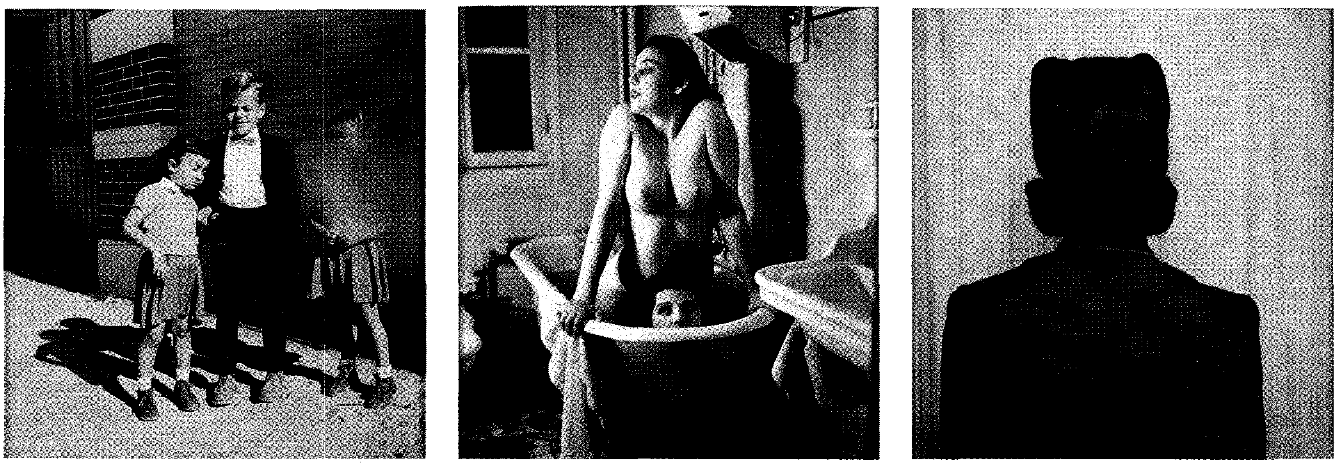


NATIONAL BESTSELLER

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX

edge? No one plays jazz harmonica with as much passion, invention, and control. (Granted, the field is limited.) He's also a supple guitarist and a virtuoso whistler (again, few challengers). June 20-25: The **Elvin Jones Jazz Machine.** Jones sometimes seems more octopus than man, a brilliant drummer who can produce multirhythmic currents dizzying in their velocity and complexity. The late shows on June 20-22 find the master percussionist going one-on-one with the avant-garde pianist **Cecil Taylor,** in an encore of their galvanic 1999 performances.

IRIDIUM
48 W. 63rd St. (582-2121)—Through June 18: **Bobby Watson,** the intrepid neo-bop altoist, will be joined by **Carmen Lundy,** a vocalist of undervalued gifts. June 20-25: Pianist **Mal Waldron** was immortalized in Frank O'Hara's famous poem, "The Day Lady Died." Off the page, he's still playing, and he'll be appearing with soprano saxophonist **Steve Lacy,** whose plangent tone and edgy improvisations complement Waldron perfectly. Mondays belong to electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.**


European and American examples of works by "photographer unknown," from the Walther collection, at the Metropolitan Museum.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (576-2232)—Through June 18: In what looks to be the bop event of the year, two of our smartest saxophonists, **Joe Lovano** and **Mark Turner,** hook up with an all-star lineup that includes pianists **Eric Reed, John Hicks,** and **James Williams,** trombonist **Slide Hampton,** and trumpeter-arranger **Don Sickler.** They will honor tenor saxophonist and hard-bop icon Hank Mobley, who would have turned seventy this year. June 21-25 and June 27-July 2: The **Tommy Flanagan** trio. Any appearance by the world's finest jazz pianist is delicious enough, but the added treat of drummer **Albert Heath** makes this a gourmet meal. Dining.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (358-7503)—June 17: Pianist and composer **Myra Melford** has figured out how to accommodate the sonic fauvism of Cecil Taylor into her own knotty playing and writing. A smashing band helps her balance tumultuous improvising with smart, lyrically spiky writing.

UP OVER JAZZ CAFE
351 Flatbush Ave., at Seventh Ave., Brooklyn (718-398-5413)—June 16-17: The **Michael Weiss** trio. Nothing that this hard-driving pianist does can be as punishing as the brutal bop workouts that his part-time employer, the tenor terror Johnny Griffin, puts him through. But he can also get deep into the grain of classic blues and ballads.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (255-4037)—Through June 18: It took **Bobby Hutcherson** to translate the modernist grammar of sixties' jazz onto the vibraphone. He's at his best when he glides into the spare, mysterious ruminations he perfected on classics like Eric Dolphy's "Out To Lunch," but he also loves to display his piston-mallet technique on up-tempo chargers. June 20-25: A former mainstay of Joshua Redman's band, **Brian Blade** may be one of the most creative mainstream jazz drummers around, but he casts his net wider when leading his Fellowship ensemble: pop, new-age, and even country elements join the unexpected mix. The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (879-5500)—**"Other Pictures: Vernacular Photographs from the Thomas Walther Collection"** brings together more than eighty images from the teens through the sixties by unknown shutterbugs whose works conjure the style of famous contemporaries (Cartier-Bresson, Frank, Moholy-Nagy). Through Aug. 27. ♦ **"Now! Modern Photographs from the Permanent Collection."** Through Oct. 22. ♦ **"After Nicolas Poussin: New Etchings by Leon Kossoff."** Through Aug. 13. ♦ **"Art and Oracle: Spirit Voices of Africa."** Through July 30. ♦ **"Painters in Paris: 1895-1950"** presents more than a hundred modernist works from the museum's collection, by thirty-eight masters. Through Dec. 31. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—**"Making Choices."** The twenty-four-part show concentrates on works made between 1920 and 1960, drawn exclusively from the museum's extensive holdings, in a series of tightly focussed exhibitions, several devoted to a single artist (Man Ray, Cartier-Bresson, Morandi). Closing, in stages, on Aug. 22, Sept. 19, and Sept. 26. (Open Saturdays through Tuesdays, and Thursdays, 10:30 to 5:45; Fridays, 10:30 to 8:15.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (423-3500)—**"1900: Art at the Crossroads"** reopens a sort of art-world time capsule, contrasting representative works from the movements that took shape at the beginning of the past century. Established masters (Bouguereau, Burne-Jones, Degas, Eakins, Gauguin, and Munch) are displayed near the upstarts of the day (Kandinsky, Matisse, Mondrian, and Picasso). Through Sept. 10. (Open Sundays through Wednesdays, 9 to 6; Fridays and Saturdays, 9 to 8.)

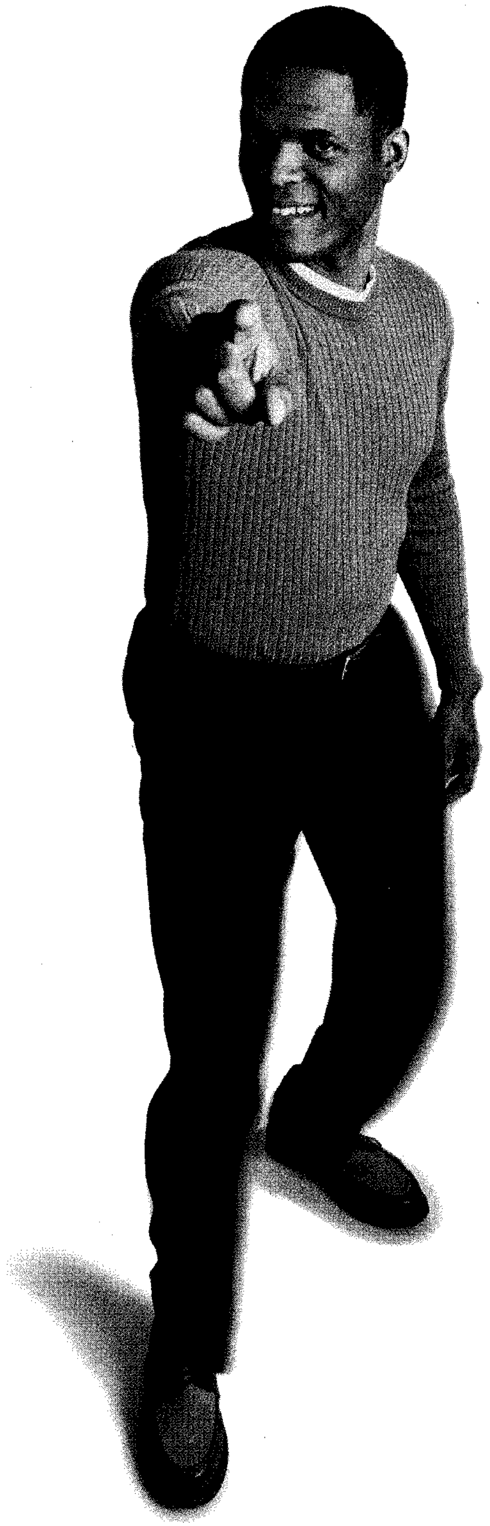
WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART
Madison Ave. at 75th St. (570-3676)—**"Carnival Strippers: Photographs by Susan Meiselas."** A Magnum photographer best known for her harrowing depictions of ravaged areas in Central America and Kurdistan, Meiselas began her career documenting a different kind of war zone—carnival striptease shows. In 1972, just one year after she started taking pictures, the artist spent the first of three summers travelling the circuit in rural New England. The strippers, from the days before silicone and StairMasters, look heartbreakingly real in these small black-and-white photographs. Then again, so do the customers: the slack-jawed rapture on the male faces in "Tentful of Marks" is vulnerability incarnate. Through Sept. 10. (Open Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6; Thursdays, 1 to 9.)

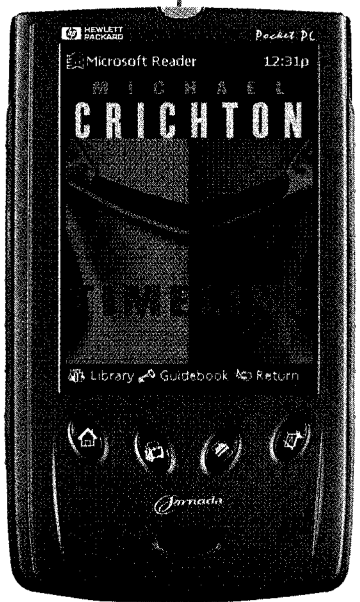
AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
Central Park W. at 79th St. (769-5100)—The Triassic equivalent of professional wrestling is here: **"Fighting Dinosaurs"** showcases one of the greatest paleontological finds of the past century. In the Gobi desert almost thirty years ago, a Polish-Mongolian team came across the remains of two dinosaurs, a carnivorous velociraptor and a vegetarian protoceratops, apparently caught in a brawl to the death. More recent finds, including early mammals and new links between dinosaurs and birds, are also on view, along with video projections, a diorama, and chip-away re-creations of digs. Oddly enough, it was geopolitics as much as shovels and picks which brought most of this kiddie catnip to light: Mongolia's post-Soviet independence allowed American scientists to return to the region they had first excavated in the twenties. Through Oct. 29. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 8:45.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART
Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Dream Days: The Art of Maxfield Parrish."** The Philadelphia artist (1870-1966) remains enormously popular, and it's not hard to figure out why. "It doesn't mean an earthly thing," Parrish said of one of his murals. "The endeavor is to present a painting which will give pleasure without tiring the intellect: something beautiful to look upon." Examples include rose-lipped maidens in diaphanous gowns, moonlight over snow-laden outbuildings, merry figures out of Mother Goose, a nude youth on a swing before an ivory castle. Parrish was a hit-maker, and his show is a blast—and about as far as an institution can get from "Sensation." Through Aug. 6. ♦ **"William Merritt Chase: Modern American Landscapes, 1886-1890."** Through Aug. 13. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

DAHESH MUSEUM
601 Fifth Ave., at 49th St. (759-0606)—**"In the Footsteps of Goethe"** offers a fresh look at familiar terrain: Italy seen through German eyes. Like their English and French colleagues, German painters flocked to Rome in the nineteenth century, often with a copy of Goethe's ecstatic "Italian Journey" in their hands. This sampling of paintings and drawings, mostly by members of the little-known Düsseldorf circle, whets one's curiosity. Some of the smaller plein-air sketches—Oswald Achenbach's view of Sabine olive groves, for example—are as fresh as any Corot. The real revelation, though, is the work of J. W. Schirmer, whose "Italian Landscape, Civitella" shows a wide plain backed by exactly rendered, serrated mountains. It's a breathtaking image: the warmth of Italian light filtered through a reverent Germanic austerity. Through August 19. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 11 to 6.)

Can your palm do that?





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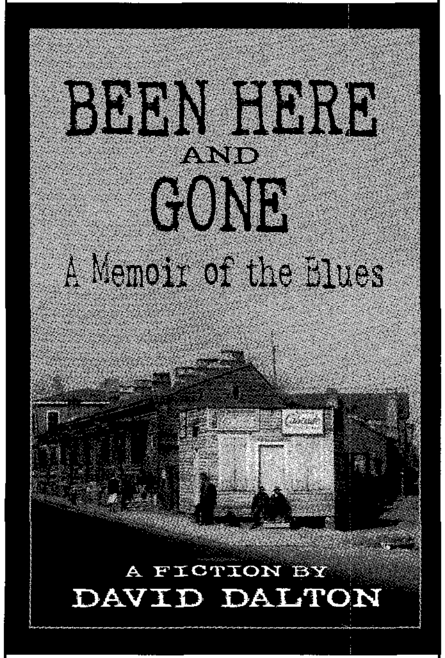

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MUSEUM OF AMERICAN FOLK ART
Columbus Ave. at 65th St. (977-7170)—Since 1937, when William Edmondson was awarded his first and only one-man show at MOMA, the folk sculptor's works have rarely been seen in New York. Believing that "God don't like much style," and preferring a railroad spike to a chisel, Edmondson developed a rough-hewn folk modernism that has occasional flashes of Brancusi-like simplicity. The forty or so examples on view—blocky limestone angels, women, birds, and various four-legged "critters"—are appealingly tender and graceful, if a little repetitive. Equally charming are the photographs Edward Weston and other visitors took of Edmondson himself, standing in his sculpture-cluttered Nashville yard. Through Aug. 27. (Open daily, except Mondays, 11:30 to 7:30.)

MUSEUM OF THE CITY OF NEW YORK
Fifth Ave. at 104th St. (534-1672)—In the tradition of the Farm Security Administration's documentary coverage of the American dust bowl in the nineteen-thirties, **"New York Now 2000"** presents photographs of the life and landscape of this city, by forty-one contemporary photographers. The works range from intimate daguerreotypes to mural-size color prints. The show is inspiring—especially Abelardo Morell's inverted camera-obscura projections of the city's commercial lights on the walls of private spaces, Luis Mallo's close-ups of the mudra-like hands of passengers on the train, and the landscapes of nature in hard places by Richard Rothman. Through Oct. 15. (Open Wednesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 5; Sundays, noon to 5.)

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF THE AMERICAN INDIAN
1 Bowling Green (668-6624)—**"Reservation X: The Power of Place."** Housed at the tip of lower Manhattan, in a gorgeous Cass Gilbert building, the Smithsonian's National Museum of the American Indian is one of the city's hidden treasures. Through the summer, seven installations by Native American artists from the United States and Canada mine the complexities of tribal identity and community in contemporary life. The title comes from one of the show's highlights, Shelley Niro's film "Honey Moccasin." One installation shows a clip from the film's hilarious fashion-show sequence, and surrounds the monitor with the costumes themselves: traditional tribal garb with a Gen-X twist—for example, Froot Loops for beads and lollipops for fringe. The most moving work is Nora Naranjo-Morse's half-adobe, half-HUD dwelling, an elegiac indictment of assimilation. Through Aug. 20. (Open daily, 10 to 5, and Thursday evenings until 8.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

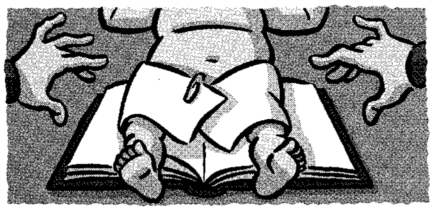
JOHN BOWMAN
Theatrical paintings (in both senses: they depict theatres in dramatic fashion) by an American artist with an eye for the hollow romance of European grandeur. The subject matter is occasionally heavy-handed, as in the full-house audience gazing directly at you in "Solo," but Bowman's skill as a colorist and his flair for light more than make up for it. The most interesting canvases are painted from a backstage vantage point, where the lighting equipment takes on the creepy appearance of a Louise Nevelson sculpture. Through June 30. (Winston Wächter Mayer, 39 E. 78th St. 327-2526.)

Short List

FREDERICK EDWIN CHURCH
Berry-Hill, 11 E. 70th St. 744-2300.
Through July 15.
INKA ESSENHIGH
Mary Boone, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St.
752-2929. Through June 24.

BOOK CURRENTS

In the Name of the Father



CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

As Warren Beatty prepares to celebrate Father's Day with his new arrival, the current state of fatherhood is up for its annual review. In **FATHER COURAGE** (Harcourt), Suzanne Braun Levine, a former editor of *Ms.* magazine, asserts that more men than ever, celebrity or otherwise, are trying to juggle work and diaper-duty. Buttressed by dozens of interviews with dads (and only dads—the mothers aren't given the opportunity to confirm or deny their husbands' stories), Levine argues that we have entered the "second stage of the gender-role revolution," and that today's fathers are slowly carving out their own version of "Mommy's Rules." Fred G. Leebron paints a much bleaker picture of fatherhood in his first novel, **SIX FIGURES** (Knopf), the story of a middle-class Everydad who finds his identity as a parent and husband threatened when his wife is attacked, a crime for which he becomes first a suspect and then a pariah in his yuppie neighborhood.

Public opprobrium has a different face in Jesse Green's **THE VELVETEEN FATHER** (Ballantine), the memoir of a gay man who, with his partner, adopts two baby boys. Here, the tension arises less from the negotiation of maternal and paternal roles than from the struggle between conventional and alternative notions of family. With wit and candor, Green describes the public's persistent suspicion of gay fathers, focussing on what he calls one of the "few officially sanctioned prejudices left in America"—the tendency to see homosexual men as pedophilic predators. And yet, what propels Green toward parenthood is not so much politics as the unashamedly sentimental desire to be, like the velveteen rabbit in Margery Williams's classic children's story, "made real at last by a child's true love."

—*William Cohen*

Books.
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Stemming from his stint on *Morning Edition*, this loosely autobiographical collection introduced the unsuspecting literary world to the sardonic wit of the NPR commentator. Whether targeting his own behavior as a disgruntled Macy's elf or fabricating characters like a cheap suburban dad who performs home surgery, Sedaris is perfectly on target and hilariously off kilter.
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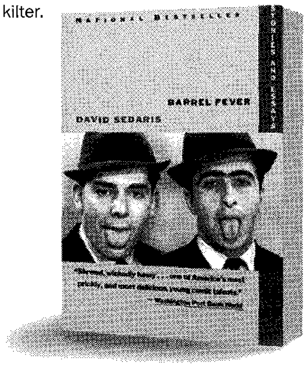
NATIONAL BESTSELLER
BARREL FEVER
DAVID SEDARIS
STORIES AND ESSAYS

NAKED

In a manic yet touching memoir, the bestselling author turns his unmistakable voice toward the moments that molded him into the lovably warped human being that he is today. From a compulsive childhood in North Carolina to a tiny New York apartment, Sedaris skewers and *embraces the memories, the family members and the* society that formed his pysche.
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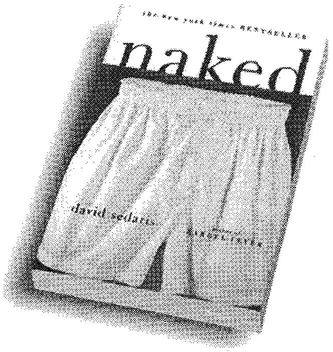
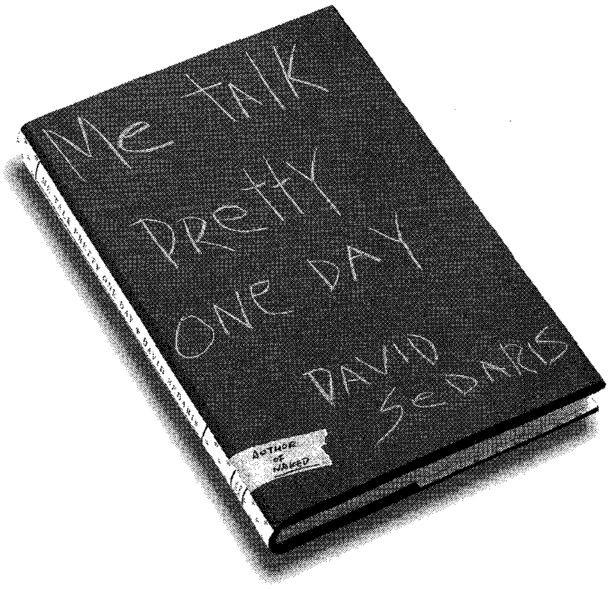

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER
naked
david sedaris


Me Talk Pretty One Day
David Sedaris
Author of Naked

ME TALK PRETTY ONE DAY

While living in Paris as a regular contributor to Public Radio International's "This American Life," Sedaris has gathered a wealth of brilliant new material. In his latest collection, the author unleashes his sharp wit on such worthy topics as learning to speak French, the plight of the ex-pat and the usual family targets.
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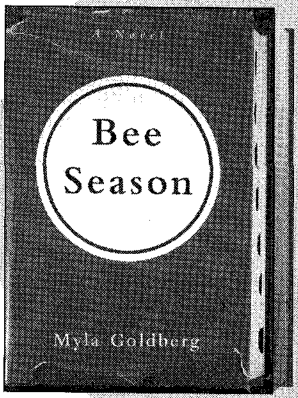

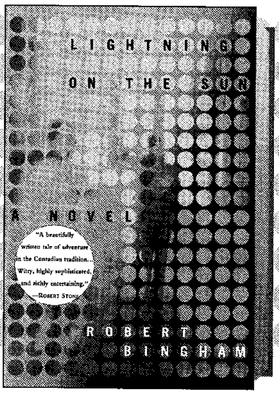

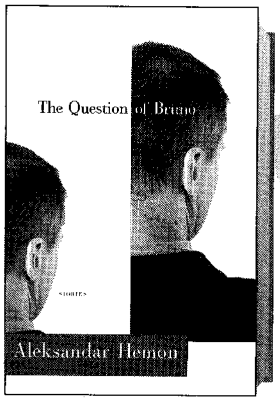

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"A beautifully written tale of adventure in the Conradian tradition."
—Robert Stone, author of *Dog Soldiers*

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GALLERIES-CHELSEA

GREG CHANN
Dissolving graphite in alcohol over sheets of vellum, Chann makes beautiful dark silvery puddles. At first glance, they seem like visual one-liners. But the artist slices, rearranges, and layers the sheets, creating subtle photo-collage-like composites. When seen through several translucent layers, the graphite lightens to an airy gray-blue, and the undulant edges of the puddles could almost be mistaken for petals, as if each image were an X-ray of some improbable leaden blossom. Through June 30. (Thatcher Projects, 529 W. 20th St. 675-0222.)

WALTON FORD
Ford's latest gigantic, Audubon-like watercolors depict a quartet of rampaging wild animals, all male: a lion, an orangutan, a European bison, and an Indian elephant in a state of sexual arousal. The technique is nineteenth-century, and so is the earnestness with which Ford loads each picture with narrative and political symbolism: the lion, a majestic extinct North African species, is shown devouring Delacroix, whose sketching materials lie abandoned in the distance. The bison staggers to the ground, its coat smoldering from a conflagration in the Caucasus. The orangutan brandishes an expensive Nikon, a trophy from a *National Geographic* photographer. And the elephant trots along happily, surrounded by a gorgeous profusion of European birds. Though one half expects footnotes from Edward Said to appear in the margins, these pictures are, above all, a feast for the eyes. Through June 30. (Kasmin, 293 Tenth Ave., at 27th St. 563-4474.)

TATTOO MIKE / OONA STERN
The former Coney Island sideshow performer died of complications from diabetes in 1996, but his body, a virtual encyclopedia of riotous polychromatic patterning, lives on in twenty years of photographs. They document the steady, ivylike encroachment of imagery—the first few hearts, tigers, tears, and daggers gradually metastasized until they covered ninety per cent of his skin. Accompanying the photos are Mike's own drawings, paintings, and collages, which have a gothic, sexualized cast. / In the back gallery, a contrastingly spare installation features a carpeted version of the archetypal wooden art-gallery floor. Carefully cut and seamed together with duct tape, Stern's plush blond planking is a wry, wall-to-wall sendup of Carl Andre. Both shows through July 27. (Harris, 529 W. 20th St. 463-9666.)

Short List

DEBORAH BUTTERFIELD
Thorp, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 25th St.
691-6565. Through July 28.

GALLERIES-DOWNTOWN

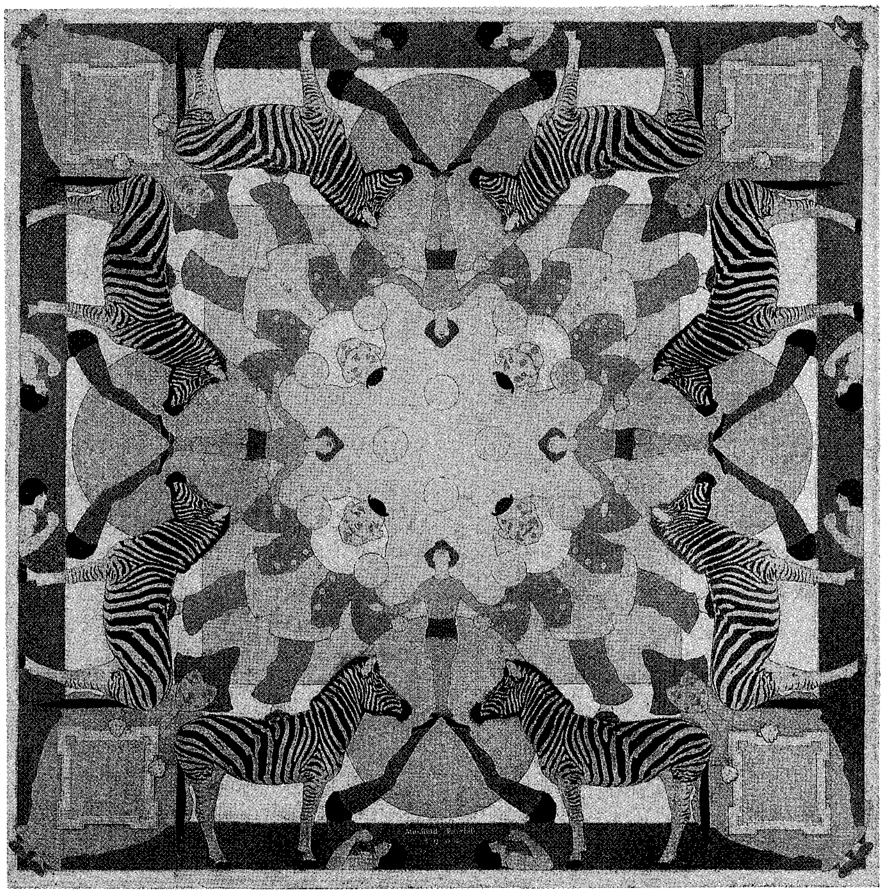
DAN KEPLINGER
If you caught this year's Academy Awards show, you're bound to remember the exuberance of Keplinger, a.k.a. "King Gimp," when the documentary of his life's story won the Oscar, a moment that gave new meaning to the idea of jumping for joy. Confined to a wheelchair by severe physical disabilities, Keplinger paints with his head, using a brush attached to a souped-up helmet. His subjects are the classic genres: portraiture, still-life, landscape. No doubt the exhilaration one feels in their presence is due in part to the odds against which they were created, but the intensity of the best work, like the sloe-eyed chartreuse sylph in "Eyes (#21)," is its own reward. Through June 30. (Kind, 136 Greene St. 925-1200.)

Short List

GARY GISSLER
123 Watts Gallery, 123 Watts St.
219-1482. Through June 30.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S
June 14: Impressionist and Modern oils may be selling for sums that could practically keep a small nation afloat, but that doesn't mean bargains can't be found elsewhere in the auction market. Sales of antiquities, for example, regularly offer excellent art works at surprisingly reasonable prices. Top quality always comes at a price—the two-millennium-old bronze head of a Roman athlete which highlights this auction may sell for a cool million—but more modest collectors may want to take a close look at Egyptian, Greek, and Roman sculptures and ceramics that will sell for far, far less. ♦ June 15: Fine jewelry. ♦ June 17: Comic books and comic art, including many pen-and-ink originals of "Little Orphan Annie," "Pogo," and "Little Lulu" daily strips. ♦ June 20: Watches and clocks. ♦ June 20-21: In September of 1857, the S.S. Central America, carrying a cargo of California gold, sank in a hurricane off the South Carolina coast. Four hundred and twenty-five lives were lost in the shipwreck, which still stands as the worst peacetime maritime disaster in American history. Since the gold had been intended to shore up New York banks reeling from a fiscal crisis, the loss of the cargo set off a financial panic before insurance payments could stabilize the situation. Divers recovered the treasure in 1989, and the portion of it that was given to the original insurers or their successors now comes to the public market, in the form of gold bars, ingots, coins, raw nuggets, and dust. ♦ June 26: Fine books and manuscripts, including a holograph of a lengthy poem by Daniel Defoe and a copy of the first printed edition (from 1516) of Aristophanes' "Lysistrata" and "Thesmophoriazusae," bound with a copy of the same author's "Comoediae Novem," which was published, in its second edition, the year before. ♦ June 27: Coins, medals, and banknotes. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 606-7000.)



"Circus Bedquilt Design," by Maxfield Parrish, at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.

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CHRISTIE'S
June 14: Stamps. ♦ June 15-16: Wine. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 636-2000.)

CHRISTIE'S EAST
June 14: Moderately priced American furniture and decorative art works. ♦ June 15: American paintings and sculpture. (219 E. 67th St. 606-0430.)

DOYLE
A sale of jewelry, watches, silverware, and coins. (175 E. 87th St. 427-2730. June 14-15.)

SWANN
June 15: An auction of photographic literature and photography; highlights include a bound volume containing a hundred and ten large-format photogravures from Edward Curtis's "The North American Indian," as well as a rare group of Soviet pieces from the nineteen-thirties. ♦ June 22: Rare, inscribed, or otherwise collectible volumes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, including a first edition, printed on *verge d'arches* paper, of "Ulysses" (of which only a hundred and fifty exist). (104 E. 25th St. 254-4710.)

GUERNSEY'S
This house offers what is thought to be the world's first commercial auction of graffiti art, including works on canvas and related ephemera: finally, an opportunity to fill in the gaps in your collection with classics by BAMA 1, PC KID, VIRUS, and other luminaries. (Puck Building, Houston and Lafayette Sts. June 14-15. For information, call 794-2280.)

PHOTOGRAPHY

MORTON BARTLETT
A self-taught sculptor and photographer, Bartlett (1909-92) molded half-life-size children from plaster, tailored clothing for them, then posed and photographed them, both dressed and undressed. The gallery compares his "special fasci-

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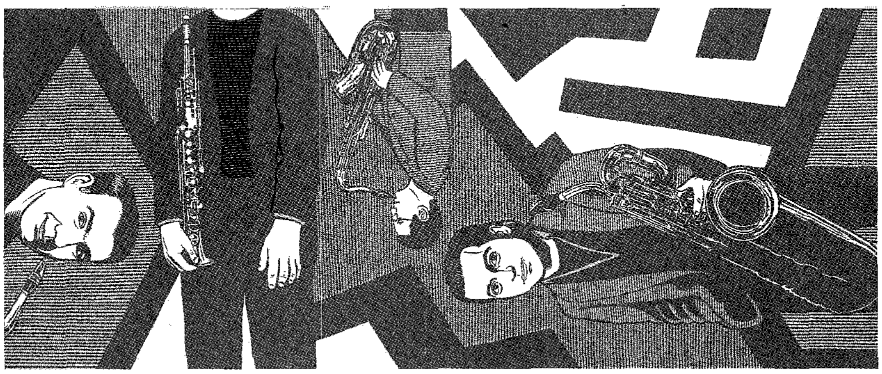
nation with children" to Mark Twain's and Lewis Carroll's, though his work is far less humorous and more ominous than theirs. Through June 24. (Ricco/Maresca, 529 W. 20th St. 627-4819.)

ROBERT BOURDEAU
Bourdeau shows abandoned American and European coal mines, textile mills, grain elevators, and steel plants as monuments to the industrial age. Look now, before they're all turned into museums, condos, and Internet-startup offices. Through June 17. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave., at 57th St. 750-7070.)



The Prism Saxophone Quartet, in recital at Christ and St. Stephen's Church.

MICHAEL KUPPERMAN

STUART KLIPPER
Through the National Science Foundation's Artists and Writers Program, Klipper has been to Antarctica six times over the past fourteen years, travelling with research teams. His large, panoramic views find surprising color in the white-on-white icescape, and convincing, if unsurprising, majesty in icebergs. Through July 7. (Richardson, 560 Broadway. 343-1255.)

MARIA MIESENBERGER
In these altered and enlarged family photos, Miesenberger replaces human figures with dark outlines, leaving one child of several or just a group of shadows on a monochromatic backdrop. In the disturbing absence of the photographs' central figures, blurred details and murky contexts come to the fore, a process that mimics the vagaries of memory. Through July 7. (Mann, 210 Eleventh Ave., at 25th St. 989-7600.)

ZWELETHU MTHETHWA
A series on black South African men, who are observed in informal postures, is accompanied by several large-format color portraits of black South African women at home. The sitters guard and display their small rooms, which are revealingly papered with advertisements for products and life styles unlikely to materialize anytime soon. Through June 24. (Shainman, 513 W. 20th St. 645-1701.)

TOKIHIRO SATO
Over long exposures, Sato moves around the landscape with a small light, stopping to point it at the camera for a few moments at a time. The beam burns a tiny spot on the film, which only records the artist's darker presence as a ghostly mist. In this way, he creates mini-constellations, something like a field of fireflies or a tangle of Christmas lights, wherever he goes. The effect is particularly beautiful along a short stretch of rocky Japanese coastline, and less satisfying amidst modern architecture. Through July 28. (Tonkonow, 601 W. 26th St. 255-8450.)

JUERGEN TELLER
The man who discovered Kate Moss takes advantage of fine-art photography's current fascination with the methods and look of fashion shoots ("Lights, camera, inaction!") to slip some models and beauty queens into the art market. His "Miss Worlds" offers huge, harshly flash-lit portraits of the 1999 contestants in that pageant. "Go-Sees" chronicles, less formally, a year of meetings with aspiring models. Viewers may or may not be surprised at how many of that subspecies there are in the world, and may or may not care. Through July 28. (Lehmann Maupin, 39 Greene St. 965-0753.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
1130 Fifth Ave., at 94th St. (860-1777)—Nathan Lyons's **"Riding First Class on the Titanic."** Through June 18. ♦ James Nachtwey's **"Testimony."** Through July 23. ♦ Augustus Washington's **"A Durable Momento."** Opening June 24. (Open Tuesdays through Thursdays, 10-5; Fridays, 10-8; Saturdays and Sundays, 10-6.)

Short List

MAUDE SCHUYLER CLAY
Meyerowitz, 580 Broadway. 625-3434.
Through July 14.

MARION DAVIES / LOUISE DAHL-WOLFE
Staley-Wise, 560 Broadway. 966-6223.
Both shows through June 24.

HELEN LEVITT
Miller, 20 W. 57th St. 397-3930.
Through June 29.

THOMAS RUFF
Zwirner & Wirth, 32 E. 69th St. 517-8677.
Through June 24.

ROCKY SCHENCK
Benrubi, 52 E. 76th St. 517-3766.
Through July 7.

MARLA SWEENEY
Gallery 24, 552 W. 24th St. 414-0370.
Through July 12.

AMIR ZAKI
Golden, 526 W. 26th St. 727-8304.
Through June 24.

See the museum listings for photography exhibitions at the Metropolitan Museum, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, and the Museum of the City of New York.

CLASSICAL MUSIC
OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA
Free concert performances in the parks of New York City and New Jersey. **"Madama Butterfly,"** with Georgina Lukács, Jane Bunnell, Paul Charles Clarke, and Christopher Schaldenbrand; conducted by Julius Rudel. (Cunningham Park, Queens. June 14. ♦ Van Cortlandt Park, the Bronx. June 17. ♦ Great Lawn, Central Park. June 20.) ♦ With Ms. Lukács, Wendy White, Mr. Clarke, and William Stone; Mr. Rudel. (Brookdale Park, Montclair, N.J. June 23.) ♦ With Cynthia Lawrence, Ms. White, Vladimir Grishko, and Mr. Stone; Mr. Rudel. (Miller Field, Gateway National Recreation Area, Staten Island. June 27.) ♦ **"Rigoletto,"** with Jennifer Welch, Jonathan Welch, Frederick Burchinal, and Ho Jiang Tian; Nello Santi. (Pelham Bay Park, the Bronx. June 16. ♦ Marine Park, Brooklyn. June 21.) ♦ With Youngok Shin, Roberto Aronica, Carlo Guelfi, and Dimitri Kavrakos; Mr. Santi. (Cooper River Park, Pennsauken, N.J. June 24.) ♦ **Note:** All performances begin at 8. No tickets necessary. For rain-date information, call 362-6000.

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

LITTLE ORCHESTRA SOCIETY
This orchestra's annual Vivaldi concerts usually stick to the straight and narrow, but conductor Dino Anagnost was so taken by the clarinettist Eddie Daniels's jazz-classical crossover version of the Venetian master's "Four Seasons" concertos (expanded by Daniels into what he calls "The Five Seasons"), that he decided to bend tradition a bit this year. Pianist Bill Mays, bassist Dave Finck, and drummer Dave Ratajczak join Mr. Daniels to reinforce the jazz side of the equation, while Mr. Anagnost leads the orchestra. (Alice Tully Hall. 875-5050. June 14 at 7:30.)

GOLDMAN MEMORIAL BAND
The concert band, conducted by David Eaton, includes in its program "The New York Times Color March," composed by the retired *Times* printer and avocational historian Carl Schlesinger to celebrate his newspaper's plunge, in 1997, into a sea of colored ink. The march has already been performed by bands in Kentucky and Colorado, but this is its first airing on the *Times's* turf. Whether it will displace Sousa's "The Washington Post" in the public's affection remains to be seen. Also on the program are Corigliano's "Gazebo Dances" and suites from "The Music Man" and "West Side Story." (Damrosch Park, Lincoln Center. June 18 at 6. No tickets necessary.)

NEW YORK POPS
Soprano Maureen McGovern is featured in music by Richard Rodgers, with Skitch Henderson conducting. (Brookhaven Amphitheatre, Brookhaven, Long Island. June 24 at 7:30. ♦ Damrosch Park, Lincoln Center. June 26 at 6. No tickets necessary for either concert.)

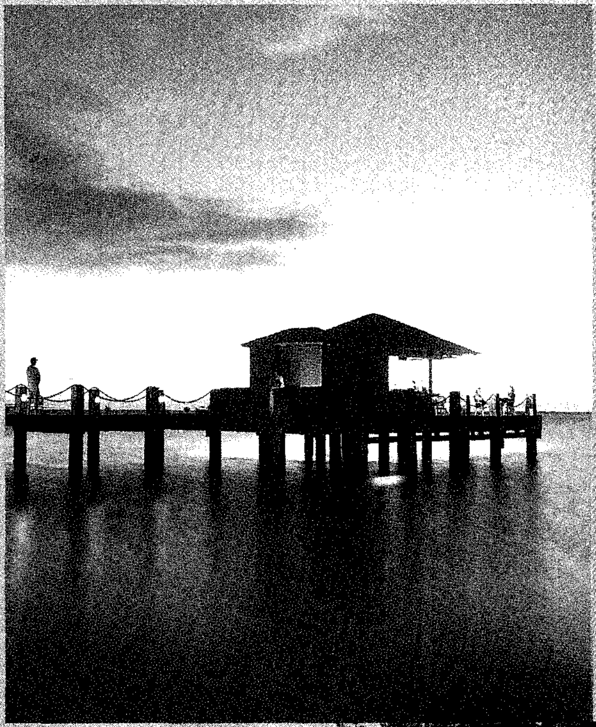
CHORISTERS OF ST. PAUL'S CATHEDRAL, LONDON
One of England's leading boys' choirs teams up with the men of New York's St. Thomas Choir for works by John Taverner, Orlando Gibbons, Bach, and others. John Scott directs, and Huw Williams, the assistant organist at St. Paul's, accompanies. (St. Thomas Church, Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. 664-9360. June 27 at 7:30.)

RECITALS

PACHYDERMAL PRODUCTION
An eight-piece ensemble performs Raphael Mostel's score for "The Travels of Babar: An Adventure in Scales," a multimedia show with projections, in which actors Anne Jackson and Eli Wallach deliver a new translation of Jean de Brunhoff's classic children's story. (Florence Gould Hall, 55 E. 59th St. 355-6160. June 14 at 7:30; June 15 at 11 A.M. and 7:30; June 17 at 1, 5, and 7:30; and June 18 at 1 and 5. On June 19 at 7:30, the production is presented in the original French, with the narration delivered by Laurent de Brunhoff, the author's eldest son.)

ELIZABETH HAINEN
The principal harpist of the Philadelphia Orchestra is joined by four string players for works by Fauré, Caplet, Jan Krzywicki, and others. (Weill Recital Hall, at Carnegie Hall. 247-7800. June 14 at 8.)

BARGEMUSIC
June 15 at 7:30 and June 18 at 4: Presenting Péter Nagy and Paige Hoffman in paprika-infused pieces for piano four-hands, by Schubert (his "Divertissement Hongroise") and Brahms (a group of his "Hungarian Dances"), in a concert that also includes Schubert's "Trout" Quintet. ♦ June 16-17 at 7:30: Charles Castleman and Mr. Nagy perform a czardas by the nineteenth-century Hungarian violinist Jenö Hubay; cellist Colin Carr joins them for Haydn's "Gypsy Rondo" Trio and violist Toby Hoffman completes the ensemble for Brahms's G-Minor Piano Quartet. ♦ June 22 and June 24 at 7:30: Mr. Nagy offers two sets of chorale variations by Bach, and is joined by colleagues for Ligeti's Horn Trio and Schumann's Piano Quintet. ♦ June 23 at 7:30 and June 25 at 4: An all-Mozart program, comprising his Pi-



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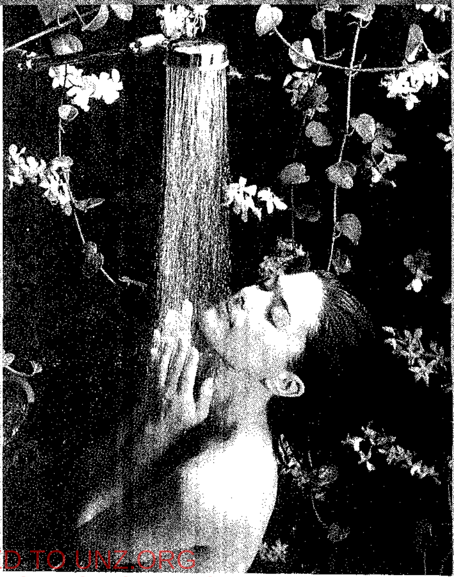

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ano Trio in B-Flat Major (K. 502), his Clarinet Trio, and his Clarinet Quintet (featuring clarinettist Charles Neidich). (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-4061.)

PUSHING THE LIMITS

Two avant-gardists share a program: Fast Forward, who creates sonic whirlpools with the Trinidadian pan (a large oil drum used as part of Caribbean steel bands), and Toby Twining, who here employs extended vocal techniques in the performance of his "Self-Accompanied Songs" and "Overtone Études." (James Cohan Gallery, 41 W. 57th St. 755-7171. June 15 at 8.)

"SUNDAYS ON THE ISLAND"

It's an especially pleasant season to check out this way-uptown series, which unrolls most Sundays at a bed-and-breakfast near the portal to City Island, the New York City maritime community that time forgot. June 18 at noon: Violinist Lara St. John, cellist Brenton Brull, and pianist Ilan Rechtman perform Schubert's Piano Trio in B-Flat Major and several of Mr. Rechtman's "Jazzicals," among other works. ♦ June 25 at noon: The pianist David Korevaar offers an all-Ravel recital that includes "Gaspard de la Nuit," "Le Tombeau de Couperin," and "Alborado del Gracioso." (Le Refuge Inn, 620 City Island Ave., City Island, the Bronx. 718-885-2478.)

PRISM SAXOPHONE QUARTET

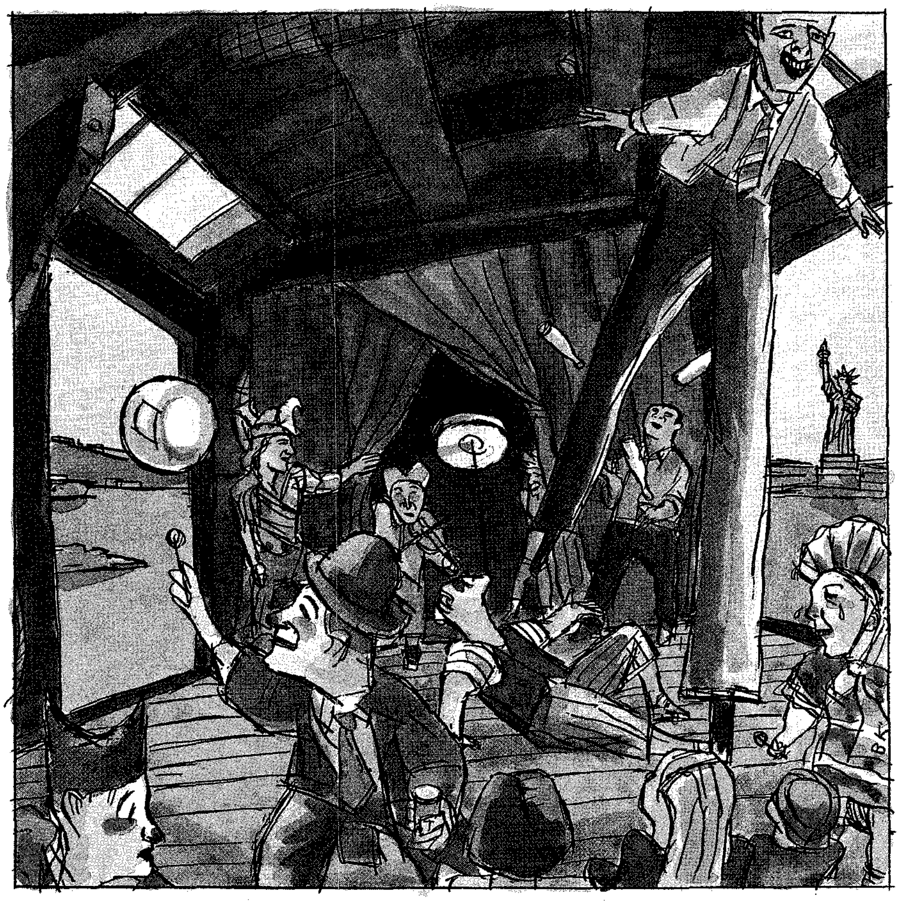
Saxophones are rarely the favorite instruments of classical-music types, probably because, dating only to about 1840, their genealogy pales against the blue-blooded status of the standard strings, woodwinds, and brasses. Although saxophone quartets have been operating since the mid-nineteenth century, their repertoire has remained rather slim. The Prism Saxophone Quartet, however, has been steadily chipping away at the stereotypes. Formed in 1984, at the University of Michigan, the quartet (two of whose members have been in place since the beginning) has sought out the best of its medium's repertoire, commissioned potentially significant new works (including a concerto grosso by William Bolcom, which it will premiere with the Detroit Symphony this fall), and expanded its sonic possibilities through the enthusiastic application of electronics. For this concert, the group has assembled solo and quartet works by six notable composers from as many nations: Iannis Xenakis (from Greece), Franco Donatoni (Italy), Anatol Vieru (Romania), and Frank Tichell (the United States; it's the première of his "Out of the Blue," commissioned expressly for the ensemble by Chamber Music America), as well as two greatly respected figures who died recently, Tristan Keuris (Holland) and Gérard Grisey (France). (Christ and St. Stephen's Church, 120 W. 69th St. June 20 at 8. For information about tickets, call 894-3702, ext. 7525.)

OUT OF TOWN

A selective listing of festival events within a reasonable drive from New York City.

MUSIC MOUNTAIN

June 17 at 8: The ten-member Hanoverian Ensemble, led by flutist John Solum, offers an all-Vivaldi program. ♦ June 18 at 3: Haydn's String Quartet in D Major (Op. 64, No. 5) takes its nickname, the "Lark," from the genial, high-flying theme, complete with avian trills, with which the first violin makes its entrance. The name wasn't the composer's idea—a savvy publisher seems to have devised it—and the tune has nothing in common with a real lark's call. But the title stuck all the same, and it doubtless played a part in securing the piece's place as Haydn's most popular quartet. In 1985, a newly formed foursome honored the work by appropriating its name, and within five years went on to win such distinctions as the Naumburg Chamber Music Award and the gold medal of the Shostakovich Competition. Since then, the Lark String Quartet has developed into one of America's most respected chamber ensembles. In this concert, the group plays not only its namesake piece, but also Schumann's Quartet in A Minor and, with oboist Bert Lucarelli, Mozart's Oboe Quartet. ♦ June 25 at 3: The Leontovich String Quartet performs Schnittke's Quartet No. 3, Schumann's A-Major Quartet, and Schumann's Piano Quartet (with Pedja Muzijevic). (Falls Village, Conn. 860-824-7126.)



"Circus Sundays," at the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge, in Brooklyn.

BEN KATCHOR

OPERA FESTIVAL OF NEW JERSEY

Opening performances of the organization's seventeenth season, which continues through July 23. June 17 and June 23 at 8, June 21 at 7:30, and June 25 at 2: "Carmen." ♦ June 24 at 8: "Falstaff." (McCarter Theatre, 91 University Pl., Princeton, N.J. 609-258-2787.)

CARAMOOR

Opening concerts of this summer festival's season, which continues through August 12. June 24 at 7: Peter Oundjian conducts the Orchestra of St. Luke's in Vivaldi's G-Major Concerto for Two Cellos (featuring Yo-Yo Ma and Edward Arron), Elgar's Cello Concerto (with Mr. Ma), and Stravinsky's "Firebird" Suite (in its 1919 version). ♦ June 25 at 4:30: Pianist Misha Dichter's recital includes Schumann's "Faschingsschwank aus Wien" and sonatas by Beethoven (in D Major, Op. 10, No. 3) and Prokofiev (his Third). (Katonah, N.Y. 914-232-1252.)

MAVERICK CONCERTS

The eighty-fifth season of this historic summer festival begins with a performance by the Broyhill Chamber Players, who offer piano quintets by Shostakovich and Dvořák (his Second, Op. 81), as well as Frank Bridge's "Miniatures" for Piano Trio. (Woodstock, N.Y. 914-679-8217. June 25 at 3. The season continues through Sept. 3.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

"CIRCUS SUNDAYS"

You don't have to go out of your way to see wacky performers in this town; they're often hard to avoid on street corners and subway platforms. But sometimes it pays to visit a place like Red Hook, Brooklyn, a down-at-the-heels waterfront community that offers some of the city's best views of lower Manhattan and the Statue of Liberty. On Sundays in June the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge, which is located in a restored 1914 Lehigh Valley Railroad barge that's tied up at the end of Conover Street, hosts an assembly of clowns, acrobats, dancers, and other circus artists. On June 18 at 2 and 4 the performers include music-saw player Nathalia Paruz, Russian contortionist Ira Burdetsky, and David Sharps, who's a graduate of L'Ecole Jacques Lecoq, a mime school in Paris, and who is also the owner of the barge. "We're making a home for the new vaudevillians," Sharps says. "This is one of the few places to see an old-style variety show. They don't do that on Broadway anymore." (Through June 25. For more information, call 718-624-4719.) ♦ On Saturday, June 17, the barge presents a summer solstice gathering, with music, dance performances, and a New York City fireboat display. The events are part of the Red Hook Waterfront Arts Celebration, which also includes the first annual Earth and Surf Parade through the neighborhood. (For more information, call 212-625-3505.)

READINGS

June 20 at 8: By writers Nuar Alsadir, Raul Correa, Ken Foster, David Means, Catherine Texier, and others, from their work. (Housing Works Used Book Café, 126 Crosby St. No tickets necessary.) ♦ June 25 at 7:30: By Daniel Handler, from his novel "Watch Your Mouth," and by Molly Jong-Fast, from her novel, "Normal Girl." (Temple Bar, 332 Lafayette St. 925-4242.)

TALKS

June 14 at 6:30: Michael Ruggiero, senior curator of the Peggy Rockefeller Rose Garden, discusses his work. (Horticultural Society of New York, 128 W. 58th St. For more information, call 516-759-1435.) ♦ June 16 at 7:30: Linda Bank Downs, author of "Diego Rivera: The Detroit Industry Murals," talks about the Mexican muralist's work in the Motor City. (Brecht Forum, 122 W. 27th St. 242-4201.)

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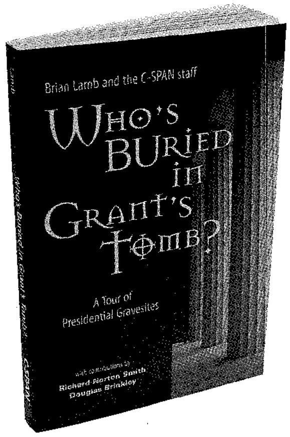
Brian Lamb and the C-SPAN staff
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A Tour of Presidential Gravesites
with contributions by Richard Norton Smith Douglas Brinkley
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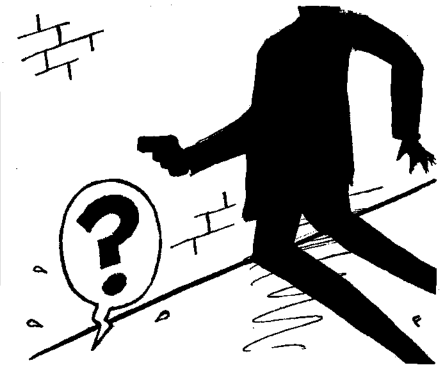

MOVIES OPENING

BOYS AND GIRLS
A romantic comedy with Freddie Prinze, Jr., and Claire Forlani, who contend with that age-old question: can best friends be lovers? Directed by Robert Iscove ("She's All That"). Opening June 16.

THE BUTTERFLY
The story of a special bond between a young boy and his teacher (Fernando Fernán Gómez), set during the Spanish Civil War. Directed by José Luis Cuerda. In Spanish. Opening June 16.

CHICKEN RUN
An animated film by Nick Park and Peter Lord, the creators of "Wallace & Gromit," about a group of chickens who devise an elaborate escape plan. Voices by Mel Gibson and Miranda Richardson. Opening June 23.

HUMANITÉ
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening June 16. (Film Forum.)

THE INTERVIEW
A thriller from Australia in which a man accused of being a serial killer (Hugo Weaving) and a police detective (Tony Martin) square off in a lengthy interrogation. Directed by Craig Monahan. Opening June 16. (Quad Cinema.)

JESUS' SON
Alison Maclean ("Crush") adapts a collection of stories by Denis Johnson about a heroin addict named FH (Billy Crudup). Opening June 16.

ME, MYSELF, & IRENE
A comedy with Jim Carrey as a state trooper with multiple-personality disorder, whose competing personalities fall in love with the same woman (Renée Zellweger). Written and directed by the Farrelly brothers. Opening June 23.

SHAFT
Can you dig it? John Singleton directs this continuation of the 1970 blaxploitation film; Samuel L. Jackson stars as the streetwise private eye. Opening June 16.

TIME REGAINED
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening June 16. (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

TITAN A. E.
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening June 16.

THE WOMAN CHASER
A comedy shot in black and white about a Los Angeles used-car salesman (Patrick Warburton) who decides to make a movie. Robinson Devor directed. Opening June 14. (The Screening Room.)

FILM NOTES

If a movie has been reviewed recently in The Current Cinema, the date of its review is given.

L'ATALANTE
To miss out on this movie should be a civil offense punishable by law. It has often been acclaimed as the masterwork of the French director Jean Vigo, although his admirers would politely point out that masterworks were all he was capable of making. The story tells of a pair of newlyweds who spend their honeymoon travelling down the Seine toward Paris and the sea. In some inexplicable way, it feels like the complete portrait of a marriage. We get sulks, stabs of jealousy, complicit smiles in the morning, and moments of desire which startle even now; how they must have looked in 1934, goodness only knows. If the couple's senses are lit by love, Vigo's are on fire, and the film remains an astonishing exploration of texture, from its famous shots of the bride, in the brilliant white of her wedding dress, stepping along the fog-slicked darkness of the boat, to the husband's wild searchings for her beneath the Seine. With a rude and rasping Michel Simon as the ship's mate—an animal answer to the lyrical longings elsewhere. In French.—*Anthony Lane* (Film Forum; June 16-22.)

BOOKWARS
A gritty, low-fi documentary about Manhattan's street booksellers which abounds in fascinating detail. The director and narrator, Jason Rosette, shows how bookselling is the kissing cousin of another urban art form: drug dealing. Both require a knowledge of profitable corner locations, an experienced eye for potential addicts, and a steady supply of mood-altering substances. In the case of books, you want to be holding works by Carlos Castaneda and Kurt Vonnegut, perennial best-sellers on the street. It's a hardscrabble existence: most street booksellers do not vend stolen books; they rely on church fairs, garbage-picking, and the state of New Jersey—"land of the two-dollar book." Unlike most war pics, the underdogs don't win in the end: Mayor Giuliani's quality-of-life campaign dispersed much of the community captured here.—*Michael Agger* (Cinema Village.)

CHARULATA
Based on a story by Indian literary giant Rabindranath Tagore and set in Bengal in the eighteen-seventies, this romantic-triangle picture by Satyajit Ray is a pellucid tale about the lonely wife of a liberal newspaper editor and her inchoate longing for his younger cousin (who, in Bengali custom, is considered the wife's brother-in-law). The scenes in which Charu, the wife (Madhabi Mukherjee), and Amal, the cousin (Soumitra Chatterjee), sublimate their passion through literature have a comic-romantic charm: their proper sensibilities prevent them from ever admitting their feelings, let alone consummating them physically. Charu's husband, Bhupati (Shailen Mukherjee), is slow to notice her ennui. He pens political criticism and spends all his time in the office, removed from the spectacle of the streets. Ray recognizes the paradox that reformers are insulated from the people for whom they toil, but the movie is too stately and attenuated. He would handle related themes with more depth and power twenty years later, in his adaptation of Tagore's novel "The Home and the World." In Bengali. Released in 1964.—*Michael Sragow* (BAM Rose Cinemas; June 15.)

CROUPIER
A slight and streamlined bauble from British director Mike Hodges, about a writer (played to stony perfection by Clive Owen) who takes a job as a roulette dealer, aiming, in the process, to write a best-seller about his experiences. The plot revolves around the big chance he takes when he rescues a mysterious woman (Alex Kingston) from a life-threatening gambling debt. The lean and twisted screenplay—nobody is what he seems—gives Hodges ample time to play with doppelgängers, duplicity, and lots of mirrors. The sombre turns of the story and low-key performances are a welcome reminder that taut moviemaking (where violence erupts unchoreographed) can be as exciting as fast-paced editing and scorching pyrotechnics.—*Bruce Diones* (BAM Rose Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Quad Cinema.)

THE DECALOGUE
In 1988 and 1989, the Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski made a series of ten films for Polish television, in which each movie, roughly an hour in length, was devoted to one of the Ten Commandments. The films, set largely around an

a real political grilling

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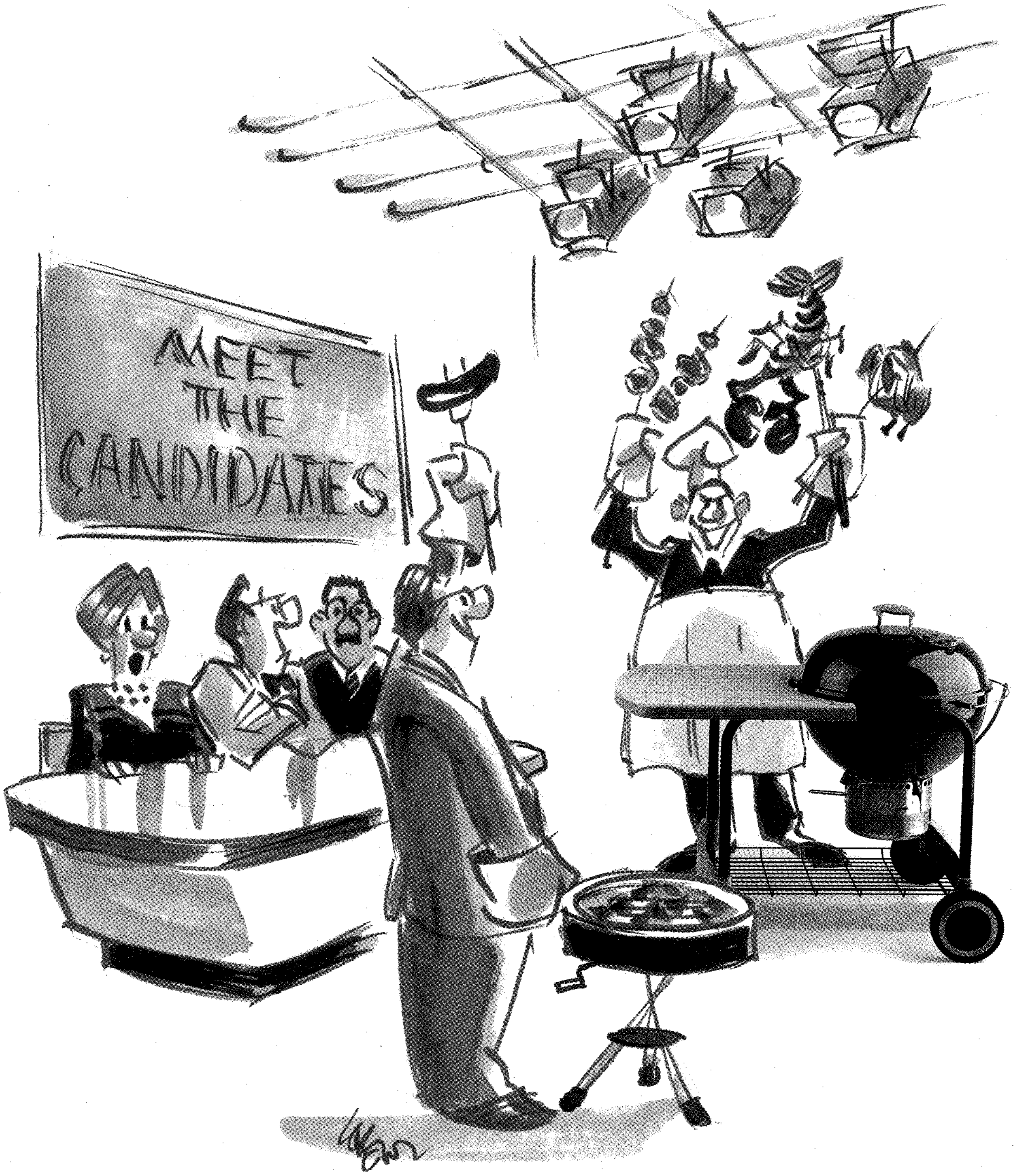

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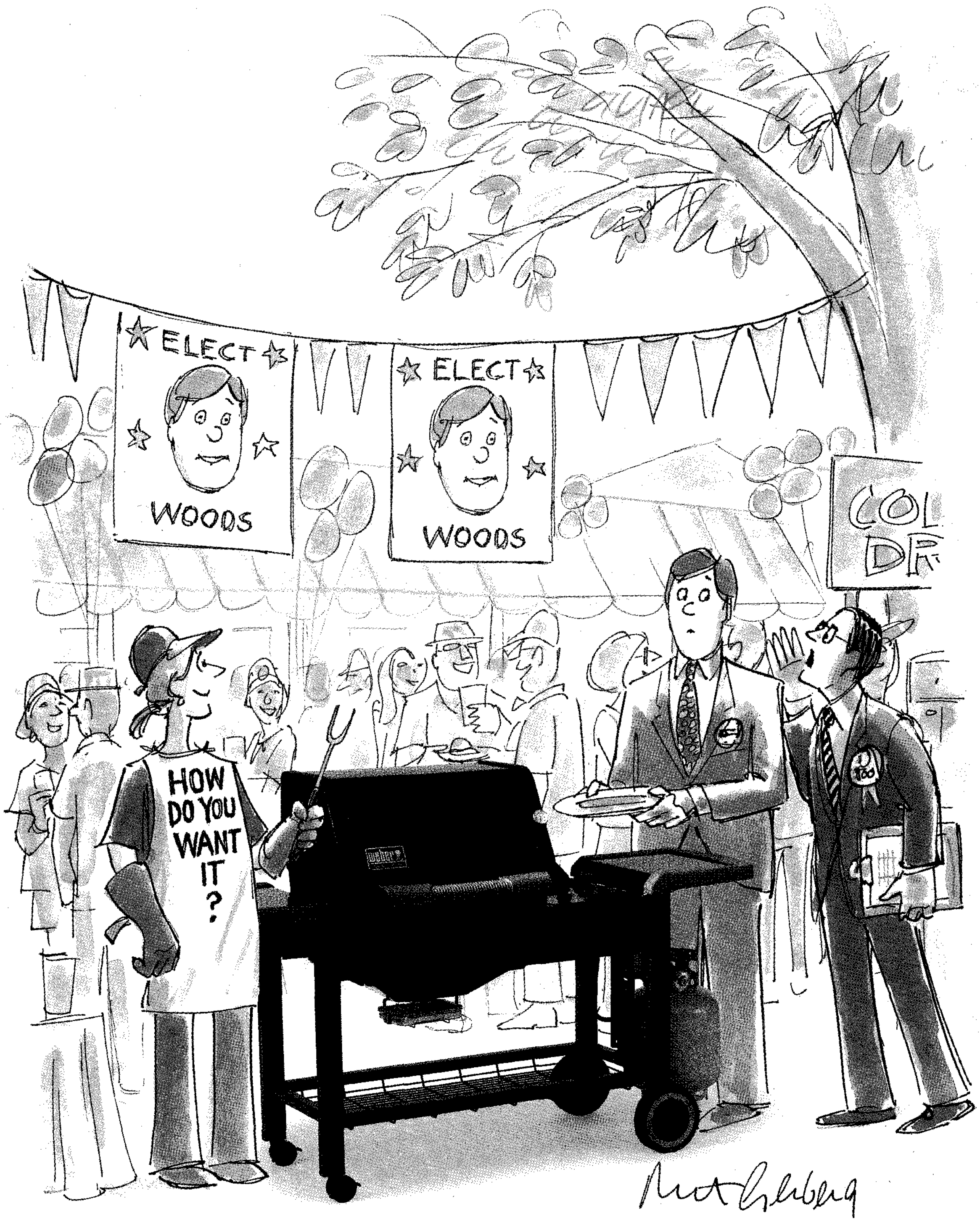
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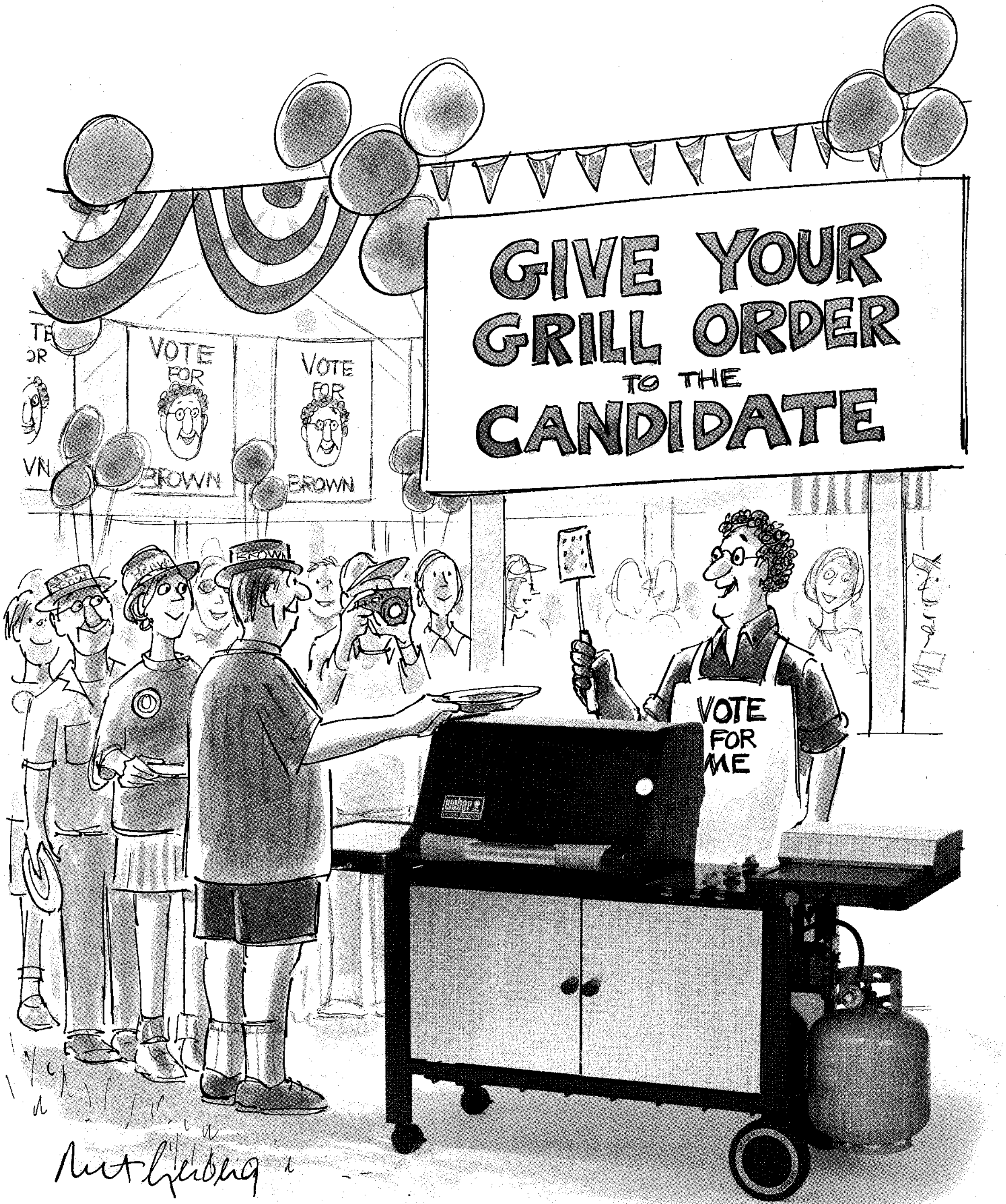
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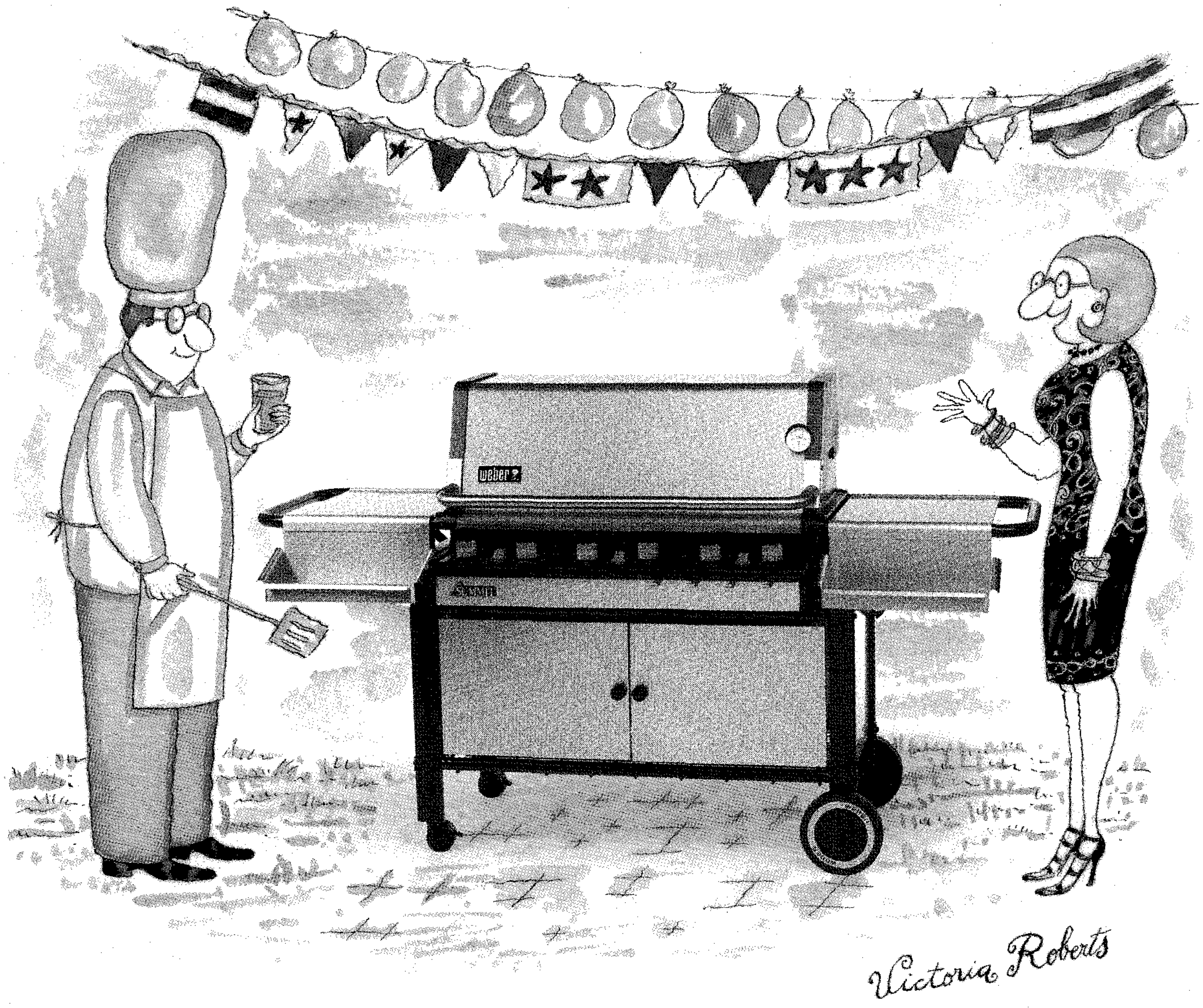
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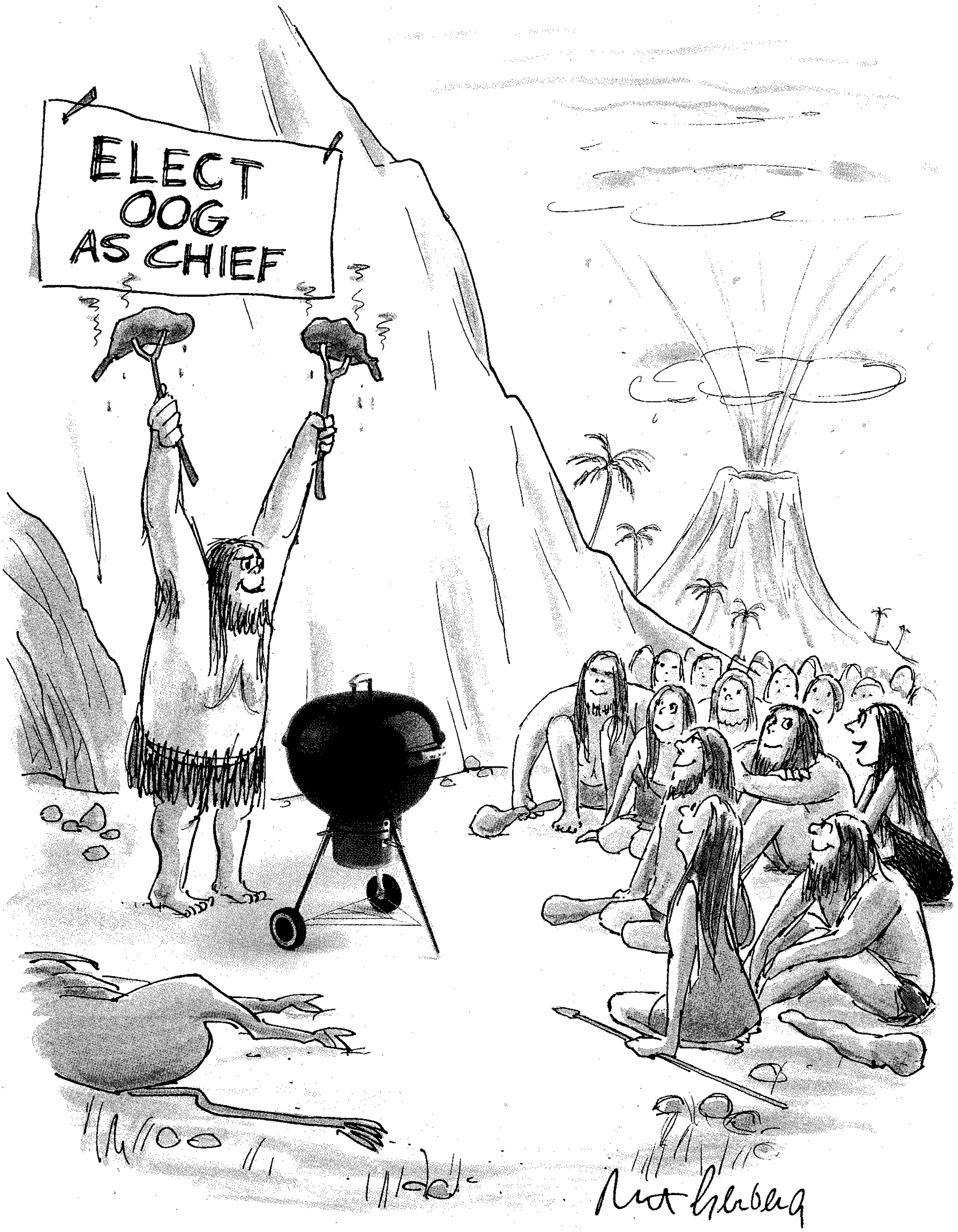
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Weber® One-Touch® Gold 22$^{1/2}$ inch Kettle apartment complex in Warsaw, are not so much literal illustrations of the commandments as fables inspired by them—very modern fables, it turns out, featuring relations between men and women, and parents and children, of a depth and intensity not seen since Ingmar Bergman stopped making movies earlier in the eighties. In the first episode, the presence of the divine interposes itself in disturbing ways in the life of a brilliant father and his adorable little boy; in the second, a woman with a possibly dying husband has to decide whether to abort a child she has conceived with another man. The films will be shown two at a time, in a series lasting five weeks, at Lincoln Plaza Cinemas in New York. National distribution will follow if the response is great enough to warrant it.—*David Denby* (6/12/00) (Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

DINOSAUR

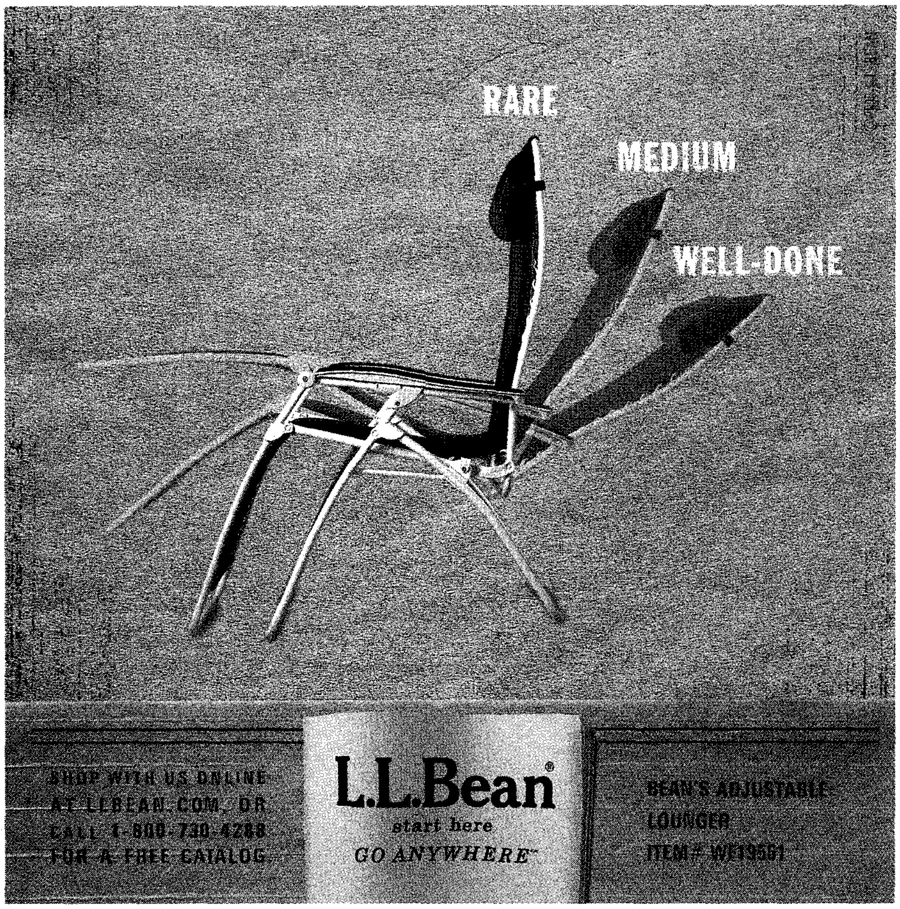
A fabulously expensive talking-animal movie from Disney which literalizes the art of animation out of existence. The animators took genuine footage of California, Jordan, and Australia and then placed computer-generated images of dinosaurs lumbering or fighting in the foreground of the shots. The detail in the computer images can be wonderful, but the photographed backgrounds, and the misguided need for "realism," drastically limit the fantastic play that animation is capable of: nothing happens that compares to the air-borne absurdities of "Aladdin" or Tarzan's surfing through the upper branches of the forest. The story itself is regulation Disney stuff about an orphaned child—an iguanodon named Aladar (the voice of D. B. Sweeney)—who gets raised by lemurs and then joins a group of herbivores heading for a fabled nesting ground. Ossie Davis, Della Reese, Alfre Woodard, and Joan Plowright can be heard among the voices.—*D.D.* (5/29/00) (Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema I, East 86th Street, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Olympia I and II, Union Square, and Waverly.)

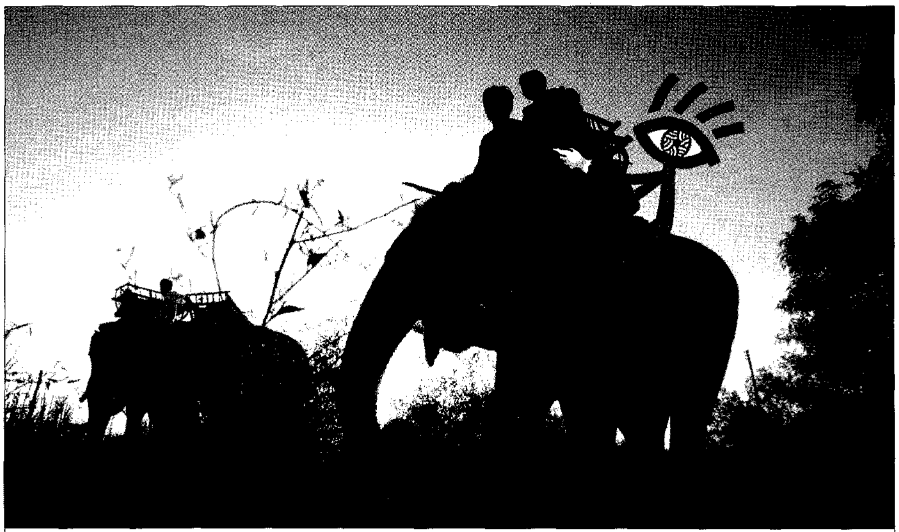
GLADIATOR

It's been many years since movie screens clanged with Roman history; directors are rightly cautious about trying to reconcile the drama of martial valor with the sight of men in short metal skirts. In the hands of Ridley Scott, however, the Empire strikes back; his new picture is strong and stirring, almost to a fault. Russell Crowe plays Maximus, a Roman general so victorious in battle and so popular with his troops that the incoming emperor, Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), decides within minutes to have him killed. Maximus escapes but winds up in slavery, under the rheumy eye of Proximo (the late Oliver Reed). His prowess established in the arena, our hero returns to the Coliseum to perform his final act of revenge. The simplicity of the plot feels right; whenever the movie strays into complexity—as in the dealings between Commodus and his sister (Connie Nielsen)—it founders and slows. What you want is the games, and Scott delivers them avidly, complete with unfed tigers. The emotional and political aftertaste of the film is another matter; the way in which it encourages a lust for blood and a rage for the restoration of order will not bear much examination.—*A.L.* (5/8/00) (Art Greenwich Twin, Astor Plaza, Chelsea Cinemas, Coronet Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, Orpheum VII, and Ziegfeld.)

GROOVE

A cheerful high arrives early in Greg Harrison's ode to rave culture: a girl in a laundromat, listening to techno on her Discman, grooves to the sight of tumbling clothes in a dryer. The scene lasts only a few seconds, but it sets a playful vibe for Harrison's amiable clubland picture. The cast is fresh and appealingly amateurish; they deliver pleasant performances in what are, admittedly, cliché situations (a boy falls in love with a girl on the dance floor, another kisses a boy for the first time). What makes the film so much fun is Harrison's low-key directorial style—there's no flashy MTV editing timed to the music, just some shaggy, psychedelic club lighting and perfect rave details (the bottled water, backpacks, lollipops, and stuffed animals) that give the picture its love-in zest. The film features British d.j. John Digweed's ecstatic electron-





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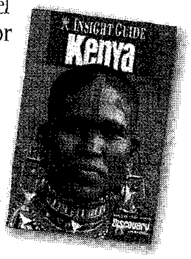

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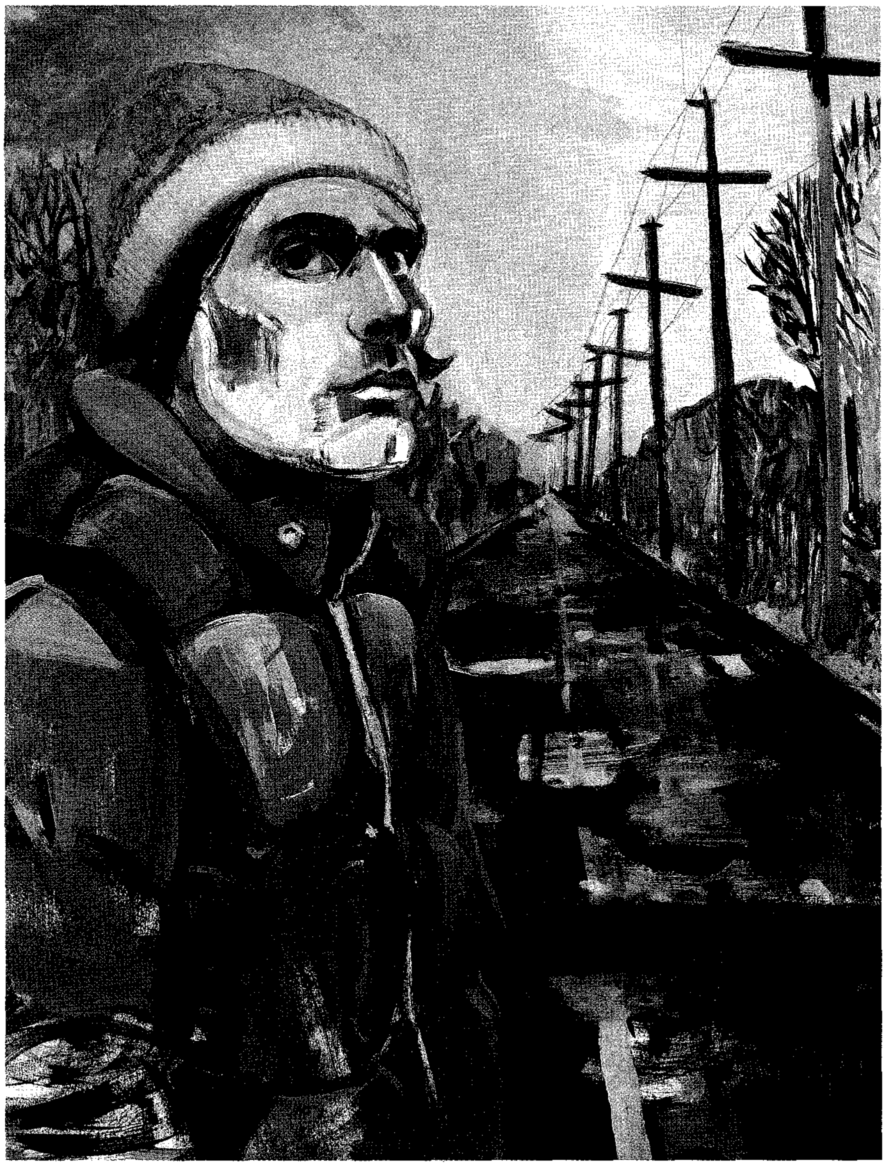

KIWI POLISH *Alison Maclean, the New Zealand-born filmmaker, has a big, messy, emotional talent that has confined itself, until now, to small, personal, riotously cinematic pictures. Her first feature, "Crush," was remarkable for the fecundity of its visual inventiveness and dialogue. In her latest film, "Jesus' Son," based on stories by Denis Johnson, she's assembled a brilliant cast composed of some of the best young actors around, including Billy Crudup (above) and Samantha Morton. With this larger palette, Maclean has intensified her preoccupations: the freakish, who live their lives in mundane circumstances, and the search for faith.*

RICCARDO VECCHIO

ica, a blast of such sheer happiness that movie audiences should bring their own glow sticks to wave joyously in the air.—*B.D.* (Angelika Film Center, Lincoln Square, and State.)

HAMLET

In this modern-dress version, the black towers of Times Square, fretted with neon, tessellated with ledges, balconies, and catwalks, make a sinister and eloquent setting for the power struggles within the Denmark Corporation. The bedraggled Hamlet (Ethan Hawke), a slacker in a knit cap, recites "To be or not to be" in a video store and washes Polonius's blood-soaked clothes in a laundromat. Michael Almereyda, a young veteran of the New York independent scene, has developed his own form of visual poetry among the corporate settings and video screens, and many of the translations into contemporaneity are both witty and oddly right. Hawke is a depressed and adolescent Hamlet, but he doesn't cross the border into self-pity, and, in the end, the emotional power of the old play comes through.—*D.D.* (5/15/00) (Angelika Film Center, Cinema II, and Lincoln Plaza Cinemas.)

HUMANITÉ

An odd, slow, disturbing near-masterpiece set in Bailleul, in the north of France, where a sad-sack policeman named Pharaon (Emmanuel Schotté) investigates a sordid crime—the rape and murder of an eleven-year-old girl. The dim but empathic Pharaon lives with his mother and longs for Domino (Séverine Caneele), the big-boned factory worker and commonplace sex goddess who lives down the street. In form, the movie is a detective story, but we watch with increasing apprehensiveness as it dawns on us that Pharaon might be a kind of sluggish Oedipus, a sleuth who uncovers the traces of a crime that he has committed himself. Or did he commit it? The director, Bruno Dumont, works in Cinemascope, and the enormous, sharply focussed images breathe air and light and a richly suggestive stillness, a palpable sense of something powerful beneath the skin. The candor of the sexual imagery hints at a hidden connection between sex and violence, though we may find it hard in the end to say what that connection is—the movie's final shots are outrageously cryptic. Cinematography by Yves Cape.—*D.D.* (6/12/00) (Film Forum.)

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST

Kenneth Branagh, who appears to be working his way through the "Collected Works of Shakespeare," has landed on the most buoyant of the early comedies. This tale of two camps—scholarly guys and demure dolls—meeting in a sylvan setting has been shifted to the nineteen-thirties, where a young king (Alessandro Nivola) goes clubbing with his flannel-suited friends (one of them played by Branagh himself) in order to enjoy a little peace before the onset of war. The historical conceit feels glumly theatrical; the film somehow sinks under the weight of a single idea, and the flat dun lighting is no help. The text has been chopped back and interspersed with musical interludes, during which the actors sing and dance to standards of the period ("Let's Face the Music and Dance," "Fancy Free," and so on). Apart from invoking the charm of the amateurish, there is not much to be said about these moments; at any rate, the ghost of Fred Astaire need have no fear. With Matthew Lillard, Adrian Lester, Natascha McElhone, and Alicia Silverstone, who bravely tackles the Shakespearean pentameter as if she were being asked to eat cactus. Pray you, do not laugh.—*A.L.* (Paris.)

M:I-2

It should have been a treat. The director is John Woo, the man who took the gravity out of gunfights. The screenwriter is Robert Towne, who wrote half the movies that made Jack Nicholson a star, and the leading lady is Thandie Newton, whose face could make a thousand ships do pretty much anything she wants. But this much-vaunted sequel to "Mission: Impossible," which hops from Australia to Spain and back again, is neither happy nor hip. It goes through the motions of the multinational action thriller, and, although those motions are as flamboyantly excessive as you would expect, the result is more gruelling than pleasurable. If the new flick has a core, it is Tom Cruise, who reprises his role as the leader of a team of spies. The sense of teamwork, however, has dropped away, and the movie becomes an homage to the grim cockiness of Cruise, and, in particular, to his indestructible physique.—*A.L.* (6/5/00) (84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Metro Cinema 1 and 2, New York Twin, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, and Village Theatre VII.)

SHANGHAI NOON

An extremely likable Western adventure that features the home-brewed stunts of Jackie Chan and the extemporaneous comic riffing of Owen Wilson (who borrows a lot from Dignan, the character he portrayed and co-wrote in the cult classic "Bottle Rocket"). Taking in a Jackie Chan movie is a lot like being ringside at a boxing match: the audience bobs, weaves, and shouts with every punch. As a Chinese imperial guard in search of a kidnapped princess, Chan fights his way through all the classic Western scenarios (the train robbery, the saloon, the showdown at the Spanish church), and Wilson fills the interludes with deadly earnest lectures on the fine points of the cowboy code.—*M.A.* (Art Greenwich Twin, Chelsea Cinemas, Cinema 3rd Avenue, East 86th Street Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, and Union Square.)

SMALL TIME CROOKS

A small-time comedy from Woody Allen, who seems to have shelved, if only temporarily, his studies of anguished human souls, preferring to draw our attention to the sight of human bodies getting into nasty scrapes and even nastier suits. In the new film, Woody himself plays a useless thief who, through no talent of his own, stumbles into money; the overriding purpose of this twist is that we get to see him wearing bilious green shirts, eye-scarring indigo jackets, and sub-Versace belts studded with gold rivets. This alone is worth the price of admission. Alongside Allen are Tracey

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Ullman, as his loud and triumphal wife, Hugh Grant, as the smoothie who is paid to educate her, Jon Lovitz, in a delightful but underused supporting role, and Elaine May, who slips the movie into her handbag and walks away with it.—*A.L.* (5/22/00) (Beekman, East 85th Street, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Olympia I and II, and Village East Cinemas.)

THIEVES LIKE US

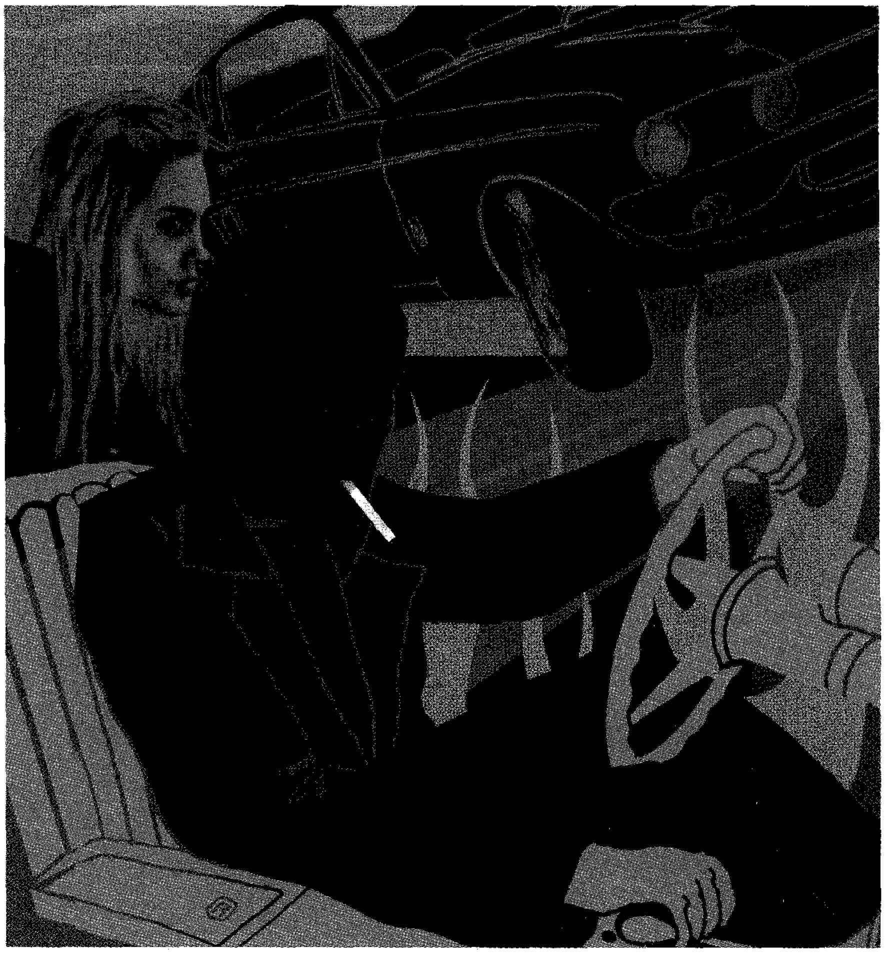
Robert Altman finds a sure, soft tone in this movie and never loses it. His account of Coca-Cola-swigging young lovers in the thirties is the most quietly poetic of his films; it's sensuous right from the first pearly-green long shot, and it seems to achieve beauty without artifice. Keith Carradine is Bowie, the boy who escapes from prison with two bank robbers, Chicamaw and T-Dub (John Schuck and Bert Remsen), and Shelley Duvall is Keechie, the girl whose drunken father runs the gas station the convicts hide in. Made in the vegetating old towns of Mississippi, the movie has the ambiance of a novel, yet it was also the most freely intuitive film Altman had made up to that time. Carradine and Duvall have the easy affinity that they showed in their much smaller roles in "McCabe & Mrs. Miller"; when Keechie and Bowie fall in love it's two-sided, equal, and perfect. Released in 1974.—*Pauline Kael* (BAM Rose Cinemas; June 27.)

TITAN A. E.

A fabulous piece of eye candy from the venerated animator Don Bluth ("An American Tail," "Anastasia"), which opens with a riveting set piece—a geologically precise destruction of Earth by an alien horde. Too bad all the innovative visual pyrotechnics are wasted on a script that cobbles together every sci-fi cliché in the known universe.—*M.A.* (Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Lincoln Square, Murray Hill Cinemas, and Union Square.)

UMBERTO D.

Vittorio De Sica's Umberto D. is a stubborn old gentleman with bourgeois standards and no means, isolated in an impersonal modern city, unable to communicate with anyone except his dog. Umberto's alienation has pride and spirit in it, even though his skinny frame is stiffening. There are graceful, beautiful episodes—such as a sequence of a young servant girl rising—that would be unthinkable in a conventional movie, or even in a documentary of the time, since the sequence doesn't illustrate any social thesis but is there for itself, for what Cesare Zavattini, who wrote the script with De Sica, called "the love of reality." Zavattini wrote that "no other medium of expression has the cinema's original and innate capacity for showing things . . . in what we might call their 'dailiness.' " Perhaps what makes this film singular is that its "dailiness" is infused with so much awareness that the screen seems luminous. In Italian. Released in 1952.—*P.K.* (Museum of Modern Art; June 24.)



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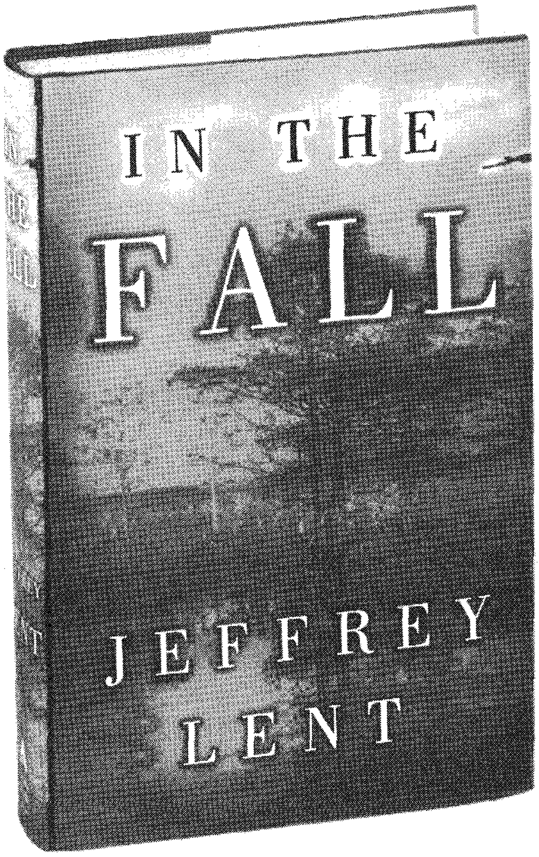

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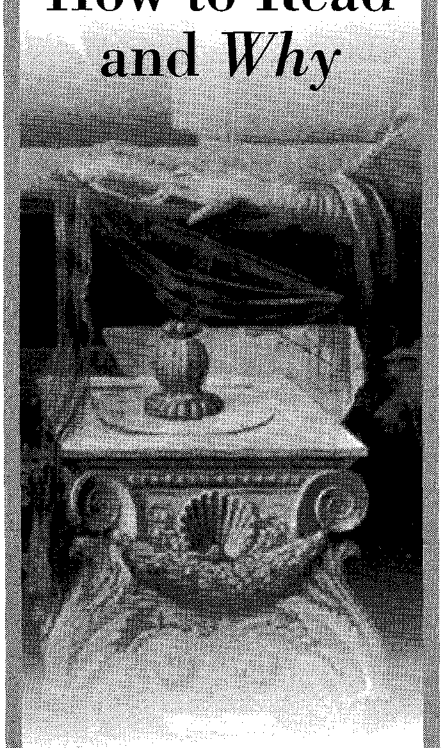

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East 85th Street, First Ave. at 85th St.
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Eastside Playhouse, Third Ave. at 55th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (398-3939).
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Gotham Cinema, Third Ave. at 58th St.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St.
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
Metro Cinema 1 and 2, Broadway at 99th St.
Murray Hill Cinemas, 160 E. 34th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 67th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Olympia I and II, Broadway at 107th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (688-3800).
Park & 86th Street Cinemas, 125 E. 86th St.
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
The Screening Room, 54 Varick St. (334-2100).
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
State, Broadway at 45th St.
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Waverly 1 and 2, Sixth Ave. at 3rd St.
Worldwide Cinemas, 50th St. between Eighth and Ninth Aves.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—"The Sopranos: The First Two Seasons," screenings of the popular H.B.O. series; each episode is one hour long. June 17-18: Episodes 17-24. ♦ June 24-25: Episodes 1-2, 13-14, and 25-26.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (505-5110)—Two parts of a trilogy of films by Polish director Andrzej Wajda about Polish resistance during the Second World War. June 15 at 7: "Ashes and Diamonds" (1958; in Polish). ♦ June 15 at 9 and June 16 at 7: "Kanal" (1957; in Polish). ♦ June 16 at 9 and June 17 at 7: Outtakes from "Fantoche," a Swiss independent-animation festival. ♦ June 22 at 8, June 23 at 7, and June 24 at 7:30: The New York première of "Escalator Over the Hill," a documentary about Carla Bley's 1971 jazz opera. ♦ Films by French director Jean Rouch, a pioneer of cinéma vérité. June 23 at 7 and June 24 at 9: "Chronicle of a Summer" (1961; in French). ♦ June 24 at 7 and June 25 at 8: "Moi, un Noir" (1959; in French).

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-623-2770)—Screenings at 4:30, 7, and 9:30, unless otherwise noted. June 14 at 7: A screening and discussion of "The Hard Way" (1942, Vincent Sherman), with film critic Elliott Stein. ♦ Two films by Indian director Satyajit Ray. June 15: "Charulata" (†). ♦ June 22: "Mahangar" (1963; in Bengali). ♦ Two classics from the Coen brothers. June 16: "Miller's Crossing" (1990). ♦ June 23: "Barton Fink" (1991). ♦ Top ten films of the nineties, as selected by *Village Voice* critics. June 17 at 2, 5:10, and 8:50: "Underground" (1995, Emir Kusturica). ♦ June 18 at 2, 4:30, 7:10, and 9:45: "Naked" (1993, Mike Leigh). ♦ June 24 at 2, 3:20, 4:40, 6, 7:20, and 9:10: "Lessons of Darkness" (1992, Werner Herzog). ♦ June 25 at 3:30: "Sátántangó" (1994, Béla Tarr; in Hungarian). ♦ Robert Altman films from the seventies. June 19: "The Long Goodbye" (1973). ♦ June 20: "California Split" (1974). ♦ June 26: "Three Women" (1977). ♦ June 27: "Thieves Like Us" (†).

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (727-8110)—June 16-22 at 1, 2:50, 4:40, 6:30, 8:20, and 10:10: "L'Atalante" (†). ♦ June 23-July 6 at 1, 3:20, 5:40, 8, and 10:20: A new print of Orson Welles's adaptation of Kafka's "The Trial" (1962), with Anthony Perkins as Joseph K.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (708-9480)—Through July 4: Screenings of ten restored Italian classics. The series begins on June 22 at 6 with Mario Sesti's "Little Giotto and the Giants" (2000), a conversation with master film printer Vincenzo Verzini. All films are in Italian. June 22 at 6 and June 23 at 2:30: "The White Sheik" (1952, Federico Fellini). ♦ June 24 at 2: "Umberto D" (†). ♦ June 24 at 5: "Flowers of St. Francis" (1950, Roberto Rossellini). ♦ June 25 at 1: "La Dolce Vita" (1960, Fellini). ♦ June 25 at 5: "8 1/2" (1963, Fellini). ♦ June 26 at 6: "Red Desert" (1964, Michelangelo Antonioni).

MUSEUM OF TELEVISION AND RADIO
25 W. 52nd St. (621-6800)—Through September 3: A complete retrospective of Norman Lear's soap opera parody, "Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman," which originally aired in 1976.

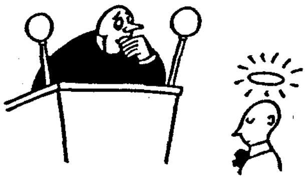
THE SCREENING ROOM
54 Varick St. (334-2100)—Blaxploitation films. June 16-17 and June 23-24 at midnight: "Foxy Brown" (1974, Jack Hill).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (875-5600)—June 14-29: The Human Rights Watch International Film Festival. Thirty works from twelve countries, all of which focus on struggles for personal and political freedom. The festival opens on the 14th with Beverly Peterson's documentary about American skinheads, "Invisible Revolution" (2000), followed by "Showdown in Seattle" (2000), a collaborative film about the recent protests at the World Trade Organization summit. Highlights are listed here; for a compete schedule, visit http://www.filmlinc.com. June 14 at 6:15: "Spoils of War" (1999, David Blaustein). ♦ June 14 at 9:15 and June 16 at 6:30: "A Civilized People" (1999, Randa Chahal Sabbag). ♦ June 16 at 9:15 and June 17 at 9: "Edge of the City" (1957, Martin Ritt). ♦ June 18 at 5:15 and June 19 at 8:30: "Harmed Forces" (1999, Irit Gal). ♦ June 20 at 6:15: "Daring to Resist" (1999, Martha Lubell and Barbara Attie) and "Zyklon Portrait" (1999, Elida Schogt). ♦ June 23 at 9:15: "Garage Olimpo" (1999, Marco Bechis). ♦ June 24 at 9:15: "Public Enemy" (1999, Jens Meurer).

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

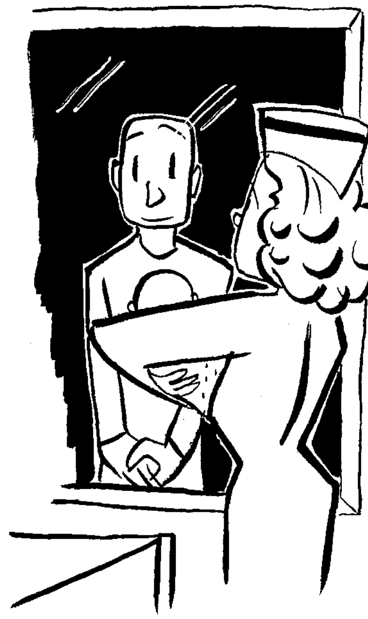
COMMENT
PATERNAL INSTINCTS



Last month, after the Supreme Court permitted a new Oregon law to go into effect granting adults who were adopted in infancy access to their birth records, there was much discussion of the threat that the new law poses to birth mothers who don't want contact with their genetic offspring—who have no wish to be visited by the ghost of decades past, particularly when that ghost has an uncannily familiar lopsided smile. Little, however, has been said about the potential impact of the law on the so-called birth fathers of babies given up for adoption. Of course, many adoptees' birth certificates will be silent on the issue of paternity; in fact, the appellation "birth father" may seem inappropriate for men who in some cases were barely around for the conception, never mind the eight hours of labor. But once an adoptee has found Mom, in some cases, with a certain amount of sleuthing, Dad can be tracked down, too. One can only hope that all father-and-child reunions are as joyful as that experienced by Martin Amis, whose new memoir tells of meeting the nineteen-year-old girl with whose mother he had had a fling in his early twenties. ("It's you," Amis's wife said to him when she first set eyes on the lost daughter.) By the time Father's Day, 2001, rolls around, there may be a whole slew of new Oregonian celebrants who missed diaper duty but are now ready to have a beer and watch the game with a grownup Junior.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

This new adoption law is predicated upon the notion that bloodlines are inexpungeable. There's a vociferous lobby for this position, especially as more and more diseases are discovered to be genetically based—the right to know one's genetic heritage trumps the privacy rights of one's genetic parents—but it is hardly being consistently observed. The bloodline imperative doesn't figure in last week's Supreme Court ruling in which a pair of Washington State grandparents were denied extra visitation privileges with their late son's daughters. This judgment puts limits on the rights that can be sought in the name of genetic paternity: the girls cannot be claimed by their father's line after his death so long as their mother remains alive and fit. (It also likely puts limits on the visits they will be making to museums and zoos and all those other places that were invented for grandparents to take their grandkids to, even when those grandkids might secretly rather be at home watching TV.)



Here on the East Coast, issues of fatherhood are no less thorny. It does seem that Juan Miguel González is going to be granted the right to raise his son where and how he likes, and those who are troubled by the prospect of Elián returning to a country ruled by an unsavory head of state would do well to remember that the official observance of Father's Day was inaugurated by Richard Nixon. Meanwhile, Mick Jagger and Luciana Morad, the mother of Lucas, the latest Jaglet, have yet to decide whether it takes thirty-five thousand dollars a month to raise a child, or a mere five and a half grand—though Mick has shown no desire to emulate Juan Miguel and raise the child himself. Ronald Perelman, on the other hand, is engaged in a long-running battle with his ex-wife Patricia Duff over their daughter, Caleigh. Perelman wants custody, even though it emerged in court recently that this birth father couldn't handle the actual birth, absenting himself from the delivery room in a fit of squeamishness. Perelman's aggressive courtroom efforts to discredit Duff's mothering capacities may be unseemly (though, with six children by three different women, who better than he to compare and contrast?), but he has this much in common with the Oregonian adoptee advocates: Bloodlines matter, even to those who can't stand the sight of blood.

—*Rebecca Mead*

DEPT. OF AMPLIFICATION
NUDIE PIX REDUX

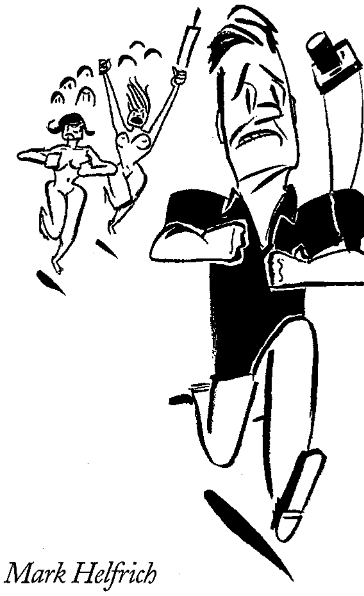
Ahem. A couple of months ago, we reported the imminent publication of a book with a title that bore the earmarks of a commercial slam dunk, "Naked Pictures of My Ex-Girlfriends: Romance in the 70's." Here, it seemed, was an exceptional journalistic and social document. Evidently, not only had Mark Helfrich, a Los Angeles-based film editor and photographer, enjoyed himself inordinately during that particular decade; he'd brought along a Nikon. And, remarkably, he'd managed to remain on such good terms with his old flames that, when he began tracking them down, two-plus decades later, thirty-two (!) women graciously signed releases saying it was O.K. to publish their nude photographs. Beyond its simple voyeuristic appeal, Helfrich's book delivered a mixture of ostensibly candid and posed snapshots, skillfully composed, that evoked in a novel way a familiar cultural-historical epoch. The accompanying text, hand-lettered in the manner of a family photo album, hummed along with a straightforward crudeness that somehow came across as disarmingly blunt rather than crassly macho.

End of story? Not exactly.

After reading in these pages about Helfrich's excellent adventures (reviews or features also appeared in *Time*, *Details*, and the *Times*), a painter named David Glynn picked up a copy of "Naked Pictures" in a SoHo bookstore. For his own work, Glynn has photographed dozens of nude models, and he recognized in Helfrich's book three women he knew, including two who had posed for him about three years ago, when they were in their mid-twenties. The math wasn't complicated: even toward the end of the nineteen-seventies, these "ex-girlfriends" would have been less than ten years old. "As sexually free as I remember (and want to believe) the 70's were," Glynn wrote in a letter to me, which I read with chagrin as well as a degree of relief, "this guy was making this stuff up!"

When, with Glynn's help, I spoke to four women who appear in "Naked Pictures," it was on a first-name-only basis. What they had to say made it plain that they (a) had modelled for Helfrich because they were getting paid, (b) hadn't known him in the Biblical sense, and (c) hadn't anticipated how they would be depicted in his book.

"Wanda" ("Wanda had a boyfriend who worked night-shifts. She would call me up at 2:30 A.M. and say, 'You want some company?' "): "I read about the book in *Time* and I immediately recognized Mark Helfrich's name. I didn't think any pictures of me would be in there, because they were taken seven or eight years ago and I hadn't been contacted since then. I'd have no problem if the book had been called, say, 'Pictures of Beautiful Women I've Met.' The ex-girlfriend thing I had a problem with, because it wasn't true. I knew Mark over a period of eight months and saw him maybe four times and he was single that whole time and didn't have a girlfriend. He definitely came across as a guy who did not go out with a lot of women. He seemed very lonely. I don't know what his intentions were. Maybe it was to look real studly. He says in the book that Wanda's breath always smelled of rum-and-Coke, and that implies I'm an alcoholic. And then he says, 'You know how people say, "That's the best sex I've ever had" . . . I never had that kind of sex with Wanda. But it was either sleep or Wanda at 2:30 A.M., so what the hell?' Well, I don't like that, either."



Mark Helfrich

"Delhi" ("What can I say about Delhi? We were in love"): "I appreciate photography and I appreciate art. But I might not do it again if I knew how it would come out. Things he wrote made him come out on top, when in fact he probably couldn't get a date. If he had really been intimate with these women, I think there would have been more tenderness in the writing. But instead it seemed sort of calloused and clichéd."

A dark-haired model who doesn't even want her alias mentioned: "I found the writing derogatory toward women. I found it really stupid. But I think the pictures are nice. I think he's a good photographer."

"Angela" ("The times I spent with Angela were pretty idyllic. We'd walk through the woods sharing a joint and end up naked together in a pile of Connecticut leaves. We were casual lovers. These pictures were taken during one of our 'Strip Ping-Pong' matches"): "The text is kind of cheesy. Am I offended? I think the world itself is so offensive, especially the way women are portrayed, it just seems a bit late in the game to be offended by that."

All this gives rise to a variety of questions: "Naked Pictures of My Ex-Girlfriends" is unmistakably art, but the meaning of art shifts with its context, so what kind of art is it? Conceptual? Can it work as conceptual art if it enlists collaborators who aren't fully clued in to the concept? In this instance, the label "pseudo-personal journalism" fits the concept. Is pseudo-journalism exempt from the ethical strictures of real journalism? In the end, what's a reader to make of the author's statement? "I've remained friends with most of my ex-es, and I asked their permission to publicly display these intimate photos. In the same spirit that the snapshots originally were taken, the women consented."

"I knew it was just a matter of time before someone asked the questions you're asking me," Helfrich said when I called him and told him what I'd learned. "The book is full of models. But the intent of the book is still intact. I do have naked pictures of all my ex-girlfriends, but when

Memories are simply moments
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I asked whether I could publish them the overwhelming response was 'No way!' So I decided I would just re-create these photographs, which I did over a few years. Even though the photographs aren't authentic period photographs, they're re-creations of the real thing. I could show you some of the originals."

I happened to have plans to be in Los Angeles, so I arranged to take him up on this offer. One recent Saturday morning, we sat on the patio of the commissary of the Disney lot, in Burbank, where he was working on a Keenen Ivory Wayans movie. He'd brought along a copy of "Naked Pictures," bookmarked with a half-dozen loose photographs that he said had inspired his re-creations. For instance, in the book, "wild and crazy Cindi," a long-haired brunette with unshaved armpits, wore a silver mask and playfully pointed a revolver at her temple. Handing me a snapshot, also of a brunette with unshaved armpits, Helfrich said, "See? Same mask, same gun. Have I spoken with her? No, I don't remember her last name." On another page, "Jill" was shown sleeping, prone on a bed with a mirrored headboard—minus the curled-up cat in the snapshot Helfrich proffered as the original. "I had enough trouble getting women to pose—I wasn't about to work with animals, too," he said.

Scrutinizing the loose photographs, I asked, "And how do I know these are original originals?"

"You have to trust me. They're real."

And I believed him, though I can't exactly say what this exercise proved.

"Just to make it fun," Helfrich said, "I'll tell you that there are some authentic pictures in the book, but I'm going to choose not to say how many"—an indication that, notwithstanding the exposure of his talent for deception, his commercial instinct hasn't dulled.

"These are real memories," he continued, referring to the text. "I embellished a couple of things here and there. But these are actual slices of life. Just because the photo opposite a particular passage of text isn't actually . . . Now, how do I want to say this? Well, let's just say I used photographs to illustrate the thoughts in the book. And the actual photographs—the ones I couldn't get permission to publish—conjured most of the stories in the book."

What about the aggrieved "Wanda"? "I'm sorry if any of the models feel distressed by the juxtaposition of the text and their photographs, but I told them what the project was. I told these models that they were like actresses playing a role. There's no way she could be mistaken for that woman in 1979. Anybody who knows her would, seeing her in the book, realize I'm obviously not talking about her."

I studied Helfrich's face—early forties, light-brown hair, blue eyes. He was pleasant-enough-looking but definitely didn't exude a lock-up-your-daughters vibe. How many women did he sleep with in the seventies? "Truthfully, I never counted. I'm not even going to venture a guess. But the late seventies and early eighties were very good to me."

The present decade has thus far been good to him in a different way. The first two printings of "Naked Pictures," a total of ten thousand copies, are almost sold out, and a third printing is in the works. "Originally, I wanted to include a little line on the copyright page that said 'Photography/Fiction.' But my publishers talked me out of it. They just said, 'Go with it. People will believe what they want to believe.' Which is true."

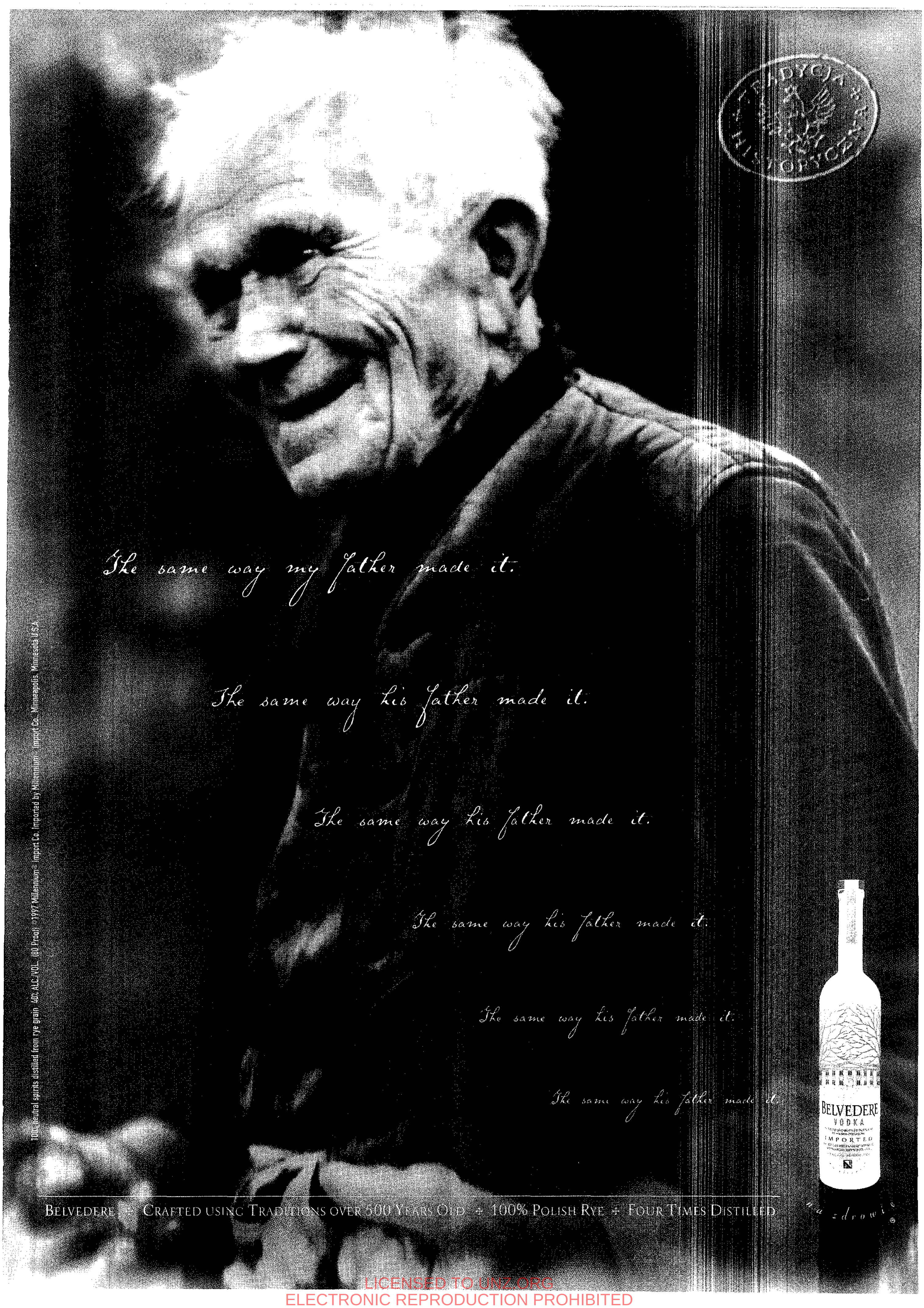
—*Mark Singer*

"She's got money and he's a 'poet.'"

SMALL WORLD DEPT.
BROOKLYN IS HOME TO HIPSTERS, JA?

One recent morning, at Stockholm's Arlanda airport, twenty-one residents of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, stood blinking behind interesting sunglasses in the bright light of the Scandinavian spring. They weren't sure what they were doing in Sweden, but, since their trip had been paid for by somebody else, it didn't really matter. "Maybe this is our revenge for Ikea," one traveller said as he boarded a chartered bus to a four-star hotel.

The group's benefactor was an alternative art space on the southern edge of Stockholm called Färgfabriken. For an installation that was meant to promote cultural exchange, Färgfabriken had decided to create a replica of Diner, a hip Williamsburg greasy spoon. For one weekend, the Swedes were importing Diner's menu, its music, and even its customers. Färgfabriken enlisted Creative Time, a New York-based arts organization, to "cast" Diner regulars and to compile a select guest list of Williamsburg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performers. "I don't know what part of my personality qualified me for this trip, but I'm hoping to find out over the next few days, so that I can develop it further," a wan young writer with a seventies haircut said. He had been Polaroid-ed while eating at Diner one night. Ten days later, he got an invitation to Stockholm.

New York artists are used to being treated like movie stars overseas, but it isn't often that random non-artists who happen to live in an arty neighborhood get a warm reception from the European avant-garde. Färgfabriken's director, Jan Åman, however, is fascinated by Williamsburg, and he is a sort of Dag Hammarskjöld for Sweden's contemporary art world. (Once, he had problems with some Russian performance artists when they started biting the audience.) "It's not just about bringing people from Williamsburg to Stockholm," he said, as his American guests arrived at the opening party held in the Swedish version of Diner and began storming the bar. "It's about creating layers of reality."

A distinctly Williamsburgian reality was on display during the evening, with many of the visitors showing the Swedes the same kind of outsized nerve that has given the world Jerry Lewis and Courtney Love. Brian Dewan, of Havermeyer Street, strummed on an overamplified zither and sang. The performance artist Elaine Tin Nyo taught a rapt audience how to dance Cuban. "It's not just about wiggling your hips," she yelled over a tape of Abba's "Fernando." "It's about wiggling your hips with a purpose." Later, while Jeremy Dawson, a new-media maverick, spun CDs and the crowd drank Brooklyn Beer, Nico Jenkins, an exuberant Diner regular, dropped his pants and danced bottomless on the bar until security guards intervened. "I have a master's in performance from the San Francisco Art Institute," he explained later.

At around 3 A.M., a spontaneous act of civil disobedience occurred when members of the Williamsburg delegation found themselves on the wrong side of a velvet rope outside an exclusive after-hours club. "This is bullshit!" they chanted as Jenkins plucked flowers from public planters and handed them to the stern Swedish doormen. The Swedes in line were horrified. "You are ruining it for the rest of us," one muttered. "But we're only trying to help you!" Jenkins shouted. The police came, but there were no arrests, and the next morning Williamsburg left Stockholm in peace.

"The reaction here was very good," Åman said the next day. "I don't think people actually understood what the Americans did, but that was the point."

—*Bob Morris*

DEPT. OF GRAND DESIGNS
FIVE CENTURIES' WORTH OF FACTS ON THE BEST-SELLER LIST

When Jacques Barzun, freshly armed with a Ph.D. in 1932, announced that he intended to write a history of Europe, the director of the Bibliothèque Nationale took him aside. "Wait until you're eighty," he advised the twenty-five-year-old scholar. Barzun thought it over, and thought it over, and then waited until he was nearly ninety to begin. This week, the fruit of that thinking, "From Dawn to Decadence: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life," moves into fifth place on the *Times'* best-seller list. Barzun's previous book to reach the list, "The House of Intellect," ascended in 1959, making the interval between appearances—forty-one years—a record, and Barzun, at ninety-two, among the list's eldest statesmen.

This, of course, says more about the cyclical nature of intellectual fashion than about Barzun's industriousness. Barzun is the author of twenty-nine books—and the editor or translator of fourteen more. His name is most closely associated with Columbia University, where he taught history for forty-eight years, and with Lionel Trilling, with whom he conducted a famous colloquium on the Great Books. He retired in 1975, but he has yet to relax—there are just too many pesky, wrong-headed academics out there who think you can hang the vast historical brocade on an ideological or theoretical frame. ("Life," Barzun once wrote, "overflows ideologies and coercive systems.") Barzun's own "method" of engaging the past is to read everything and to remember it, which helps when you're writing books on music, detective fiction, French verse, education, science, language, and history. Like Mycroft Holmes (Sherlock's older brother), Barzun is someone to whom experts turn for help in *their* fields. Toscanini invited him home one day in 1951 to discuss an oddity Barzun had noticed in Berlioz's score of "Romeo and Juliet."

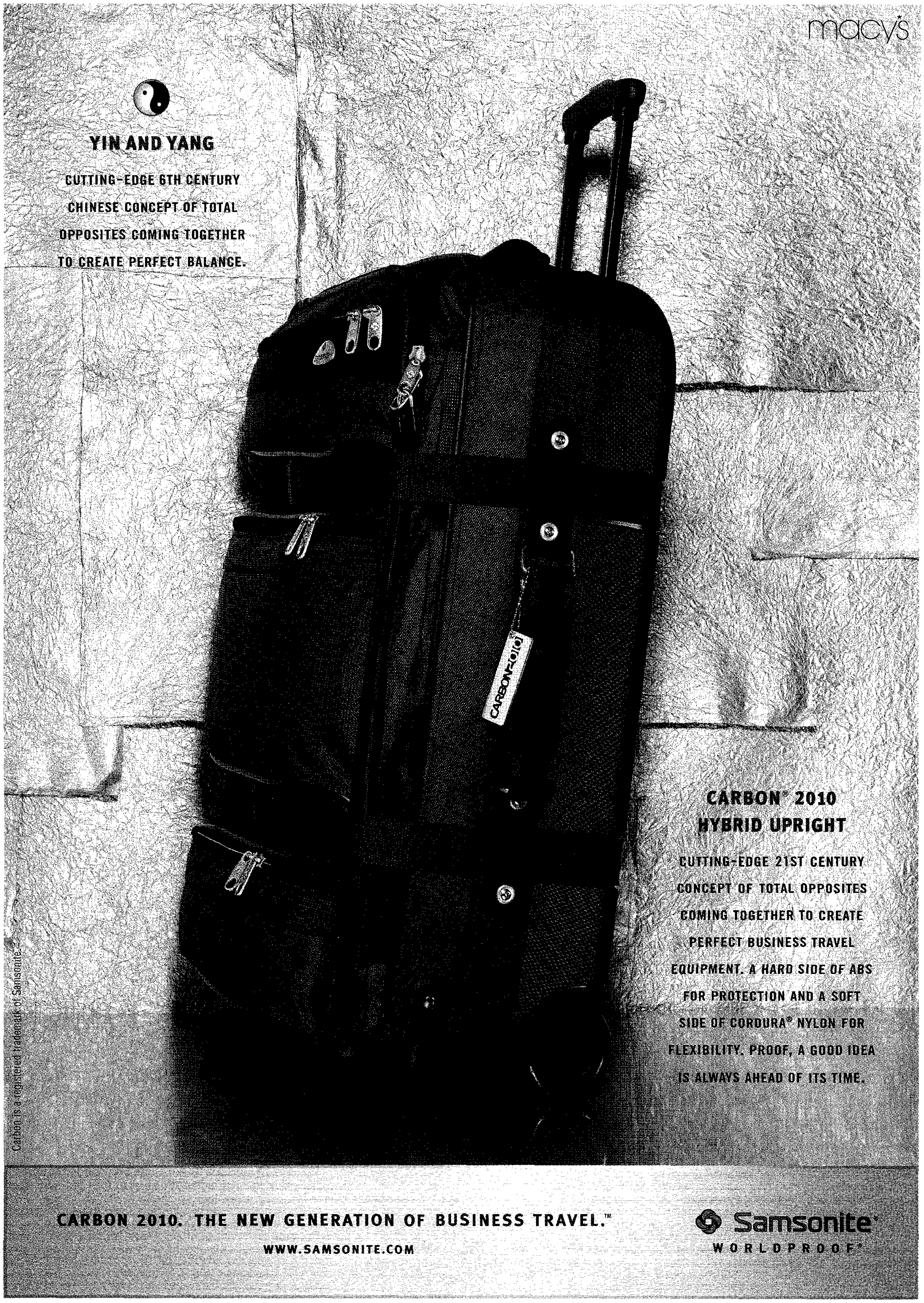
Barzun was born in France and didn't arrive in America until 1920. His father, a writer and diplomat, palled around with Paris's leading avant-garde poets and artists, and daily life was not without interest. "The first pictures seen: Cubist; the first music heard: Stravinsky's 'Sacre'; the first poetry and drama: Futurist, Simultanist," Barzun recalled in "The Energies of Art." One might add the first people met: Léger, Delaunay, Varèse, Pound, Cocteau, Apollinaire, Brancusi, Kandinsky. The first conversations heard: art, art, and more art.

Barzun has simply continued the conversation, spinning out a story in "From Dawn to Decadence" that is moved along, in part, by recurring human impulses ("Primitivism," "Emancipation") and set off by boldface quotations, printed in the margins, which act as verbal cartouches, bringing out the links and themes developed in the text. Speaking of links, if you've ever been nagged by something that's popped up more than once in a book you're reading—well, *this* book has the decency to remind you (<67) where you first came across it.

Seeing "From Dawn to Decadence" on the best-seller list, between Dr. Laura Schlessinger (of the airwaves) and Shirley MacLaine (of ancient Sumeria and environs), is a bit like having a whale nose up to you in an aquarium. Who expects an eight-hundred-page cultural history that ranges from Ficino to Johnny Rotten to be so, well, commercial? Reached at his home in San Antonio, Barzun demurred at the idea that he has written a grand book. "I'm not proposing a new philosophy of history in the tradition of Hegel or Toynbee," he said, speaking in a soft, precise manner. "I'm highlighting whatever unity is to be found amid all the conflict and diversity."

Barzun thinks the book's success may lie in the fact that he has never lost his enthusiasm for hearing a good story. "The secret to writing a good history is to remember that the stuff of history is the thoughts and deeds of living beings," he said. "If that stuff doesn't engage you, why bother to recount it?"

—*Arthur Krystal*



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THE FINANCIAL PAGE

BOOKS WILL ENDURE, BUT WILL PUBLISHERS?

The advent of new technology has a way of turning all of us into either Trotskyites, preaching the inevitability and virtue of revolution, or reactionaries, insisting that our Model Ts are still just dandy. That's peculiar, because innovation doesn't fit neatly into either of those categories. Technological change is usually not revolutionary: it doesn't demolish older ways of doing things, and it spreads unevenly, not uniformly (consider that half of all Americans don't have Internet access). But if the technology is right change is irresistible, and it does eventually end up leaving behind those who are unwilling to adapt. If you're an established business, the hardest thing to do is keep one foot in the old world while trying to step bravely into the new.

This is the challenge that the publishing industry faces right now. For the past year—and especially since half a million people downloaded a Stephen King novella from the Internet in March—we've been hearing that new digital technology will make books obsolete. Soon, we're told, we'll read everything from Henry James to John Grisham on our E-books. Bookstores will become miniature ghost towns, and the big publishers, with their stiff-necked fixation on "the book," will dry up and blow away.

Don't believe it. The book isn't going anywhere. E-books *are* getting better and better, but new technologies don't triumph just because they work well; they have to solve a real problem. And for most people the physical book offers no problems at all. The book—portable, intuitive to use—is an almost perfect technology. As for those cranks who complain about the backaches they get from lugging around overstuffed book bags, here's a simple solution: paperbacks.

The continued survival of the book, though, doesn't let publishers off the hook, because the digital revolution (the damn word is inescapable) is still going to transform the publishing business. The changes will happen erratically, not all at once, but their cumulative impact will be immense. The big publishing houses don't have a monopoly on printing or packaging technology anymore, and they have no real brand loyalty from consumers. So it's hard to see why brand-name authors like King or J. K. Rowling even need conventional publishers. And the economics of new printing and distribution technologies—which will allow you to make a profit while selling a relatively small number of copies at reasonable prices—make the emergence of new independent publishers a foregone conclusion.

This doesn't necessarily spell doom for Simon & Schuster and Knopf. Remember, publishing is not some fantastically profitable business that has suddenly come under attack but a slow-growing, low-return-on-investment business. If anything, these houses might be able to use digital technology to create new markets and find more profitable ways of reaching consumers. There are already many kinds of texts that the Internet is perfectly suited to, including textbooks (which can be updated every year), guidebooks, out-of-print books, and technical books, which are often out of date as soon as they're published. And then there are texts that in the days before the Internet couldn't get published at all because they were either too long to be magazine articles or too short to be books. King's sixty-six-page novella is a good example.

The time to start cultivating these markets is now. Last week, Barnes & Noble.com invested twenty million dollars in and became a major distribution partner for MightyWords, a Web company that lets readers buy and download all kinds of texts onto a P.C. MightyWords wants to expand its offerings to include archived magazine articles, longer essays, speeches, white papers, and movie scripts. But it wants to work with publishers, not compete with them. "In five to seven years, we'll have a digital *and* a physical copy of a million book titles," Steve Riggio, the vice-chairman of Barnes & Noble.com, says. "And we'll have a half million to a million pieces of other digital content."

One of the key providers of that content could be iPublish.com, a new division set up by Time Warner to produce and sell digital texts. iPublish will have the flexibility to offer hundreds of texts of various lengths and formats, and to enter niche markets that were previously off limits to mainstream publishers. Abridged business books will be available so that they can be read on Palm Pilots. Romance writers will be encouraged to write novellas. Works that will eventually end up as books will be serialized on line. And perhaps someday a lot of ideas that would have become three-hundred-page books costing twenty-five dollars that no one reads will, instead, become fifty-page essays that cost five dollars and sell tens of thousands of copies.

"Publishing today is mostly about finding those books that almost everyone will like," Claire Zion, the editorial director of iPublish, says. "But there are plenty of books—and shorter works—that a lot of people would like but are hard for a traditional publisher to do profitably."

MightyWords and iPublish represent an essential shift from a print-and-distribute model (I print thousands of copies of a text and hope I can sell them) to a distribute-and-print model (I print copies of a text only when people order them). This shift won't just change how we read; it'll also change *what* we read, as publishers offer new forms of content to which the P.C. or the E-book will be as well suited as the physical book is to long prose works. Those new forms won't kill off the book any more than television killed off the movies. But the shift is real. It's time for publishing to meet the new boss.

—*James Surowiecki*

MICHAEL WITTE

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PERSONAL HISTORY

ON IMPACT

After an accident, the author had to learn to write again.

BY STEPHEN KING

When my wife and I are at our summer house in western Maine, I walk four miles every day unless it's pouring down rain. Three miles of this walk are on dirt roads that wind through the woods; a mile of it is on Route 5, a two-lane blacktop highway that runs between Bethel and Fryeburg.

The third week in June of 1999 was an extraordinarily happy one for my wife and for me; our three kids, now grown and scattered across the country, were visiting, and it was the first time in nearly six months that we'd all been under the same roof. As an extra bonus, our first grandchild was in the house, three months old and happily jerking at a helium balloon tied to his foot.

On June 19th, I took our younger son to the Portland Jetport, where he caught a flight back to New York. I drove home, had a brief nap, and then set out on my usual walk. We were planning to go *en famille* to see a movie in nearby North Conway that evening, and I had just enough time to go for my walk before packing everybody up for the trip.

I set out around four o'clock in the afternoon, as well as I can remember. Just before reaching the main road (in western Maine, any road with a white line running down the middle of it is a main road), I stepped into the woods and urinated. Two months would pass before I was able to take another leak standing up.

When I reached the highway, I turned north, walking on the gravel shoulder, against traffic. One car passed me, also headed north. About three-quarters of a mile farther along, I was told later, the woman driving that car noticed a light-blue Dodge van heading south. The van was looping from one side of the road to the other, barely under the driver's control. When she was safely past the wandering van, the woman turned to her passenger and said, "That was Stephen King walking back there. I sure hope that van doesn't hit him."

Most of the sight lines along the mile-long stretch of Route 5 that I walk are good, but there is one place, a short steep hill, where a pedestrian heading north can see very little of what might be coming his way. I was three-quarters of the way up this hill when the van came over the crest. It wasn't on the road; it was on the shoulder. My shoulder. I had perhaps three-quarters of a second to register this. It was just time enough to think, My God, I'm going to be hit by a school bus, and to start to turn to my left. Then there is a break in my memory. On the other side of it, I'm on the ground, looking at the back of the van, which is now pulled off the road and tilted to one side. This image is clear and sharp, more like a snapshot than like a memory. There is dust around the van's tail-lights. The license plate and the back windows are dirty. I register these things with no thought of myself or of my condition. I'm simply not thinking.

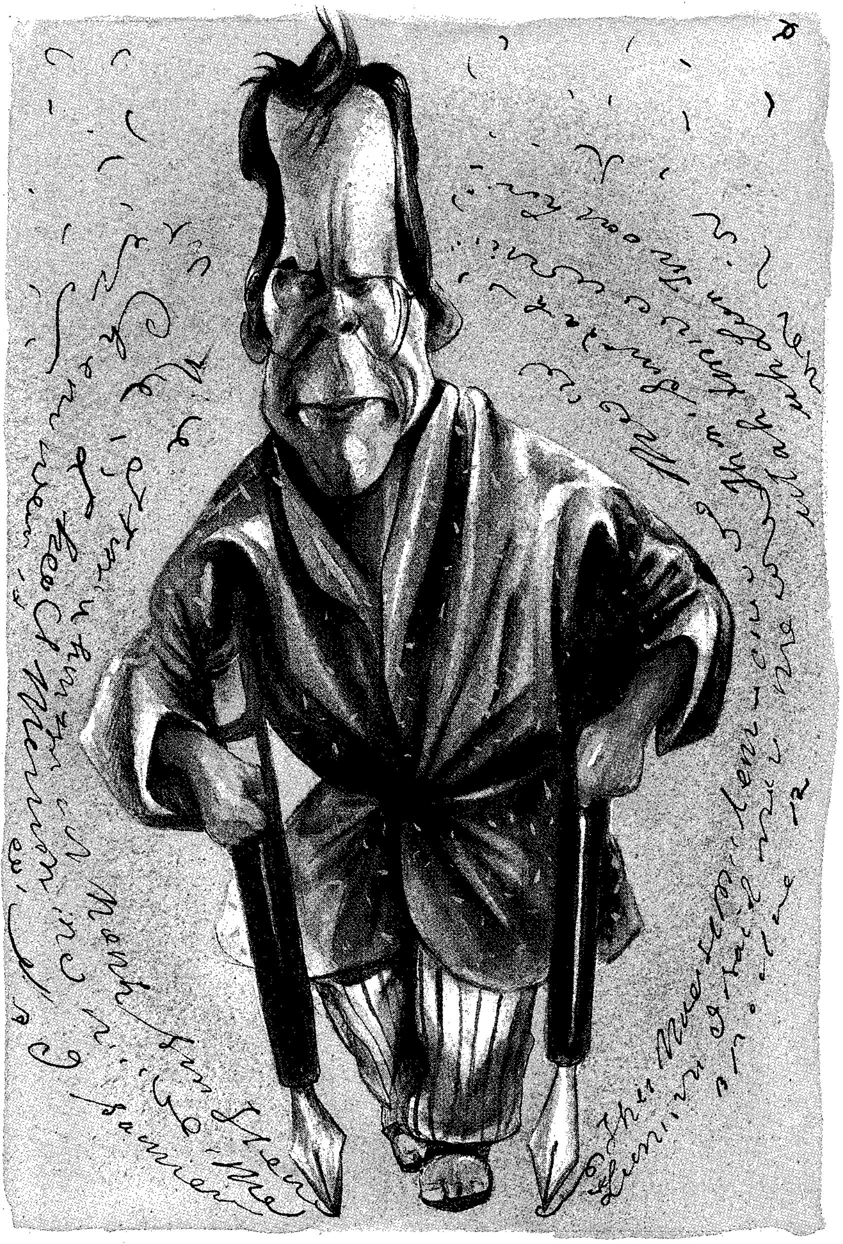
There's another short break in my memory here, and then I am very carefully wiping palmfuls of blood out of my eyes with my left hand. When I can see clearly, I look around and notice a man sitting on a nearby rock. He has a cane resting in his lap. This is Bryan Smith, the forty-two-year-old man who hit me. Smith has got quite the driving record; he has racked up nearly a dozen vehicle-related offenses. He wasn't watching the road at the moment that our lives collided because his Rottweiler had jumped from the very rear of his van onto the back seat, where there was an Igloo cooler with some meat stored in it. The Rottweiler's name was Bullet. (Smith had another Rottweiler at home; that one was named Pistol.) Bullet started to nose at the lid of the cooler. Smith turned around and tried to push him away. He was still looking at Bullet and pushing his head away from

STEVE BRODNER

the cooler when he came over the top of the knoll, still looking and pushing when he struck me. Smith told friends later that he thought he'd hit "a small deer" until he noticed my bloody spectacles lying on the front seat of his van. They were knocked from my face when I tried to get out of Smith's way. The frames were bent and twisted, but the lenses were unbroken. They are the lenses I'm wearing now, as I write.

Smith sees that I'm awake and tells me that help is on the way. He speaks calmly, even cheerily. His look, as he sits on the rock with his cane across his lap, is one of pleasant commiseration: *Ain't the two of us just had the shittiest luck?* it says. He and Bullet had left the campground where they were staying, he later tells an investigator, because he wanted "some of those Marzes bars they have up to the store." When I hear this detail some weeks later, it occurs to me that I have nearly been killed by a character out of one of my own novels. It's almost funny.

Help is on the way, I think, and that's probably good, because I've been in a hell of an accident. I'm lying in the ditch and there's blood all over my face and my right leg hurts. I look down and see something I don't like: my lap appears to be on side-



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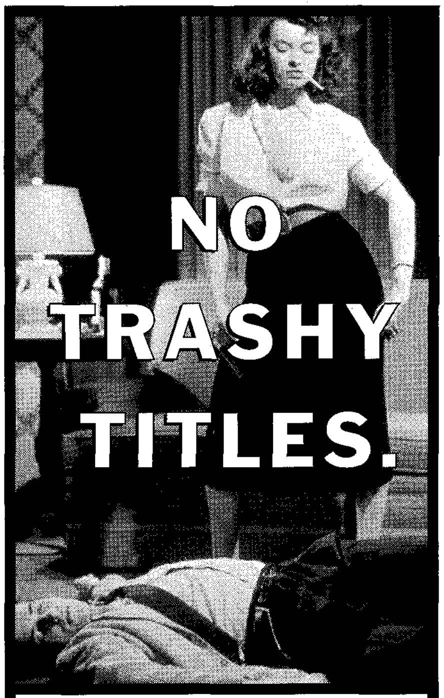
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ways, as if my whole lower body had been wrenched half a turn to the right. I look back up at the man with the cane and say, "Please tell me it's just dislocated."

"Nah," he says. Like his face, his voice is cheery, only mildly interested. He could be watching all this on TV while he noshes on one of those Marzes bars. "It's broken in five, I'd say, maybe six places."

"I'm sorry," I tell him—God knows why—and then I'm gone again for a little while. It isn't like blacking out; it's more as if the film of memory had been spliced here and there.

When I come back this time, an orange-and-white van is idling at the side of the road with its flashers going. An emergency medical technician—Paul Fillebrown is his name—is kneeling beside me. He's doing something. Cutting off my jeans, I think, although that might have come later.

I ask him if I can have a cigarette. He laughs and says, "Not hardly." I ask him if I'm going to die. He tells me no, I'm not going to die, but I need to go to the hospital, and fast. Which one would I prefer, the one in Norway-South Paris or the one in Bridgton? I tell him I want to go to Bridgton, to Northern Cumberland Memorial Hospital, because my youngest child—the one I just took to the airport—was born there twenty-two years ago. I ask again if I'm going to die, and he tells me again that I'm not. Then he asks me whether I can wiggle the toes of my right foot. I wiggle them, thinking of an old rhyme my mother used to recite: "This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home." I should have stayed home, I think; going for a walk today was a bad idea. Then I remember that sometimes when people are paralyzed they think they're moving but really aren't.

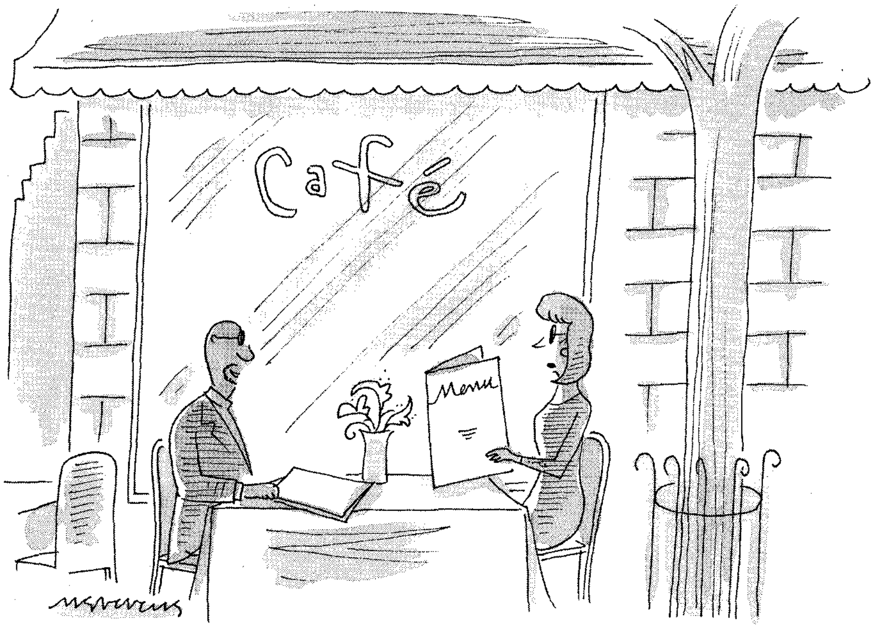
"My toes, did they move?" I ask Paul Fillebrown. He says that they did, a good, healthy wiggle. "Do you swear to God?" I ask him, and I think he does. I'm starting to pass out again. Fillebrown asks me, very slowly and loudly, leaning down over my face, if my wife is at the big house on the lake. I can't remember. I can't remember where any of my family is, but I'm able to give him the telephone numbers both of our big house and of the cottage on the far side of the lake, where my daughter sometimes stays. Hell, I could give him my Social Security number if he asked. I've got all my numbers. It's everything else that's gone.

Other people are arriving now. Somewhere, a radio is crackling out police calls. I'm lifted onto a stretcher. It hurts, and I scream. Then I'm put into the back of the E.M.T. truck, and the police calls are closer. The doors shut and someone up front says, "You want to really hammer it."

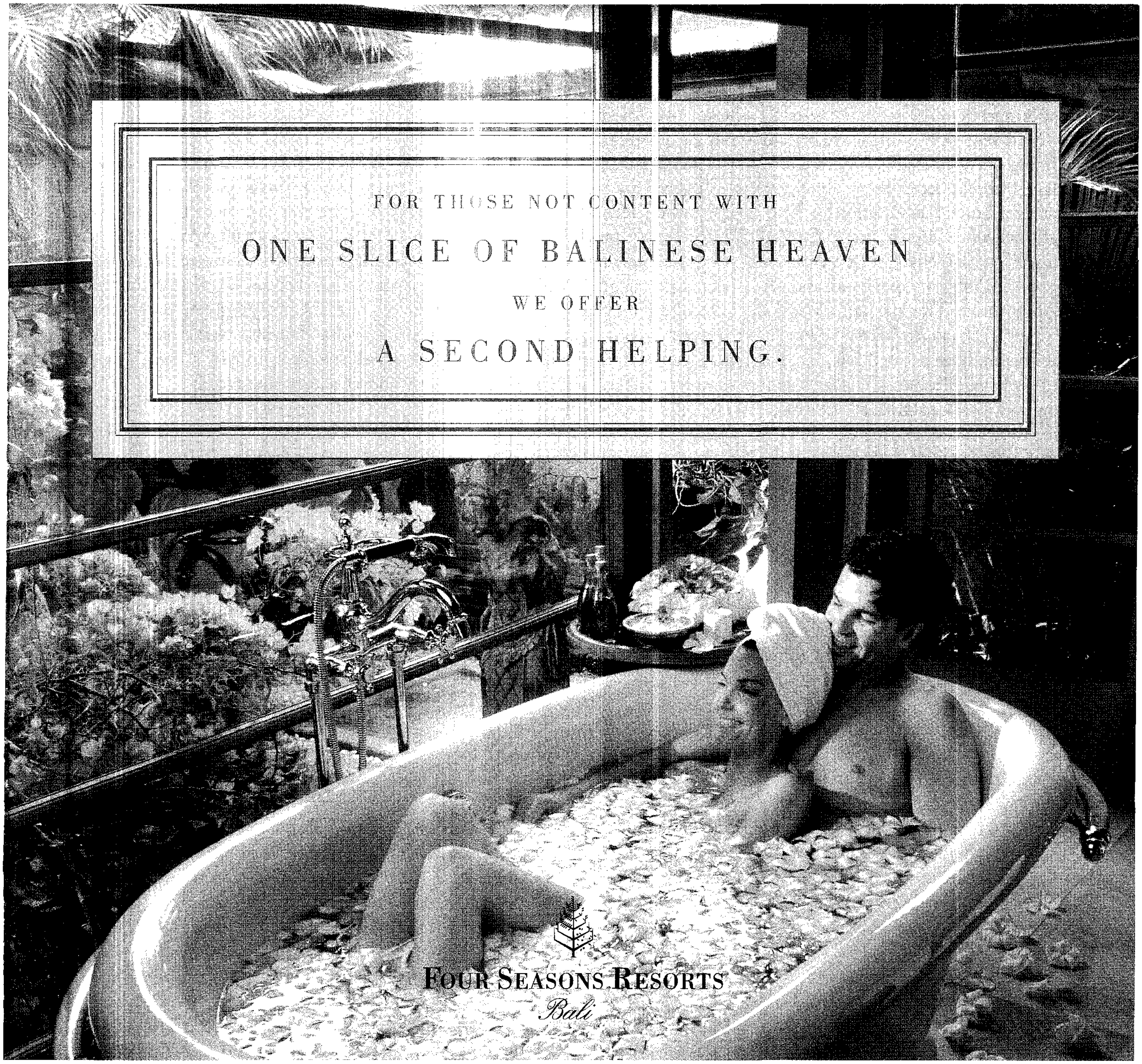
Paul Fillebrown sits down beside me. He has a pair of clippers, and he tells me that he's going to have to cut the ring off the third finger of my right hand—it's a wedding ring my wife gave me in 1983, twelve years after we were actually married. I try to tell Fillebrown that I wear it on my right hand because the real wedding ring is still on the ring finger of my left—the original two-ring set cost me fifteen dollars and ninety-five cents at Day's Jewelers in Bangor, and I bought it a year and a half after I'd first met my wife, in the summer of 1969. I was working at the University of Maine library at the time. I had a great set of muttonchop sideburns, and I was staying just off campus, at Ed Price's Rooms (seven bucks a week, one change of sheets included). Men had landed on the moon, and I had landed on the dean's list. Miracles and wonders abounded. One afternoon, a bunch of us library guys had lunch on the grass behind the university bookstore. Sitting between Paolo Silva and Eddie Marsh was a trim girl with a raucous laugh, red-tinted hair, and the prettiest legs I had ever seen. She was carrying a copy of "Soul on Ice." I hadn't run across her in the library, and I didn't believe that a college student could produce such a wonderful, unafraid laugh. Also, heavy reading or no heavy reading, she swore like a millworker. Her name was Tabitha Spruce. We were married in 1971. We're still married, and she has never let me forget that the first time I met her I thought she was Eddie Marsh's townie girlfriend. In fact, we came from similar working-class backgrounds; we both ate meat; we were both political Democrats with typical Yankee suspicions of life outside New England. And the combination has worked. Our marriage has outlasted all of the world's leaders except Castro.

Some garbled version of the ring story comes out, probably nothing that Paul Fillebrown can actually understand, but he keeps nodding and smiling as he cuts that second, more expensive wedding ring off my swollen right hand. By the time I call Fillebrown to thank him, some two months later, I know that he probably saved my life by administering the correct on-scene medical aid and then getting me to a hospital, at a speed of roughly ninety miles an hour, over patched and bumpy back roads.

Fillebrown suggests that perhaps someone else was watching out for me. "I've been doing this for twenty years," he tells me over the phone, "and when I saw the way you were lying in the ditch, plus the extent of the impact injuries, I didn't



"Tell me what you think of the menu. I wrote it."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think you'd make it to the hospital. You're a lucky camper to still be with the program."

The extent of the impact injuries is such that the doctors at Northern Cumberland Hospital decide they cannot treat me there. Someone summons a LifeFlight helicopter to take me to Central Maine Medical Center, in Lewiston. At this point, Tabby, my older son, and my daughter arrive. The kids are allowed a brief visit; Tabby is allowed to stay longer. The doctors have assured her that I'm banged up but I'll make it. The lower half of my body has been covered. She isn't allowed to see the interesting way that my lap has shifted around to the right, but she is allowed to wash the blood off my face and pick some of the glass out of my hair.

There's a long gash in my scalp, the result of my collision with Bryan Smith's windshield. This impact came at a point less than two inches from the steel driver's-side support post. Had I struck that, I would have been killed or rendered permanently comatose. Instead, I was thrown over the van and fourteen feet into the air. If I had landed on the rocks jutting out of the ground beyond the shoulder of Route 5, I would also likely have been killed or permanently paralyzed, but I landed just shy of them. "You must have pivoted to the left just a little at the last second," I am told later, by the doctor who takes over my case. "If you hadn't, we wouldn't be having this conversation."

The LifeFlight helicopter arrives in the parking lot, and I am wheeled out to it. The clatter of the helicopter's rotors is loud. Someone shouts into my ear, "Ever been in a helicopter before, Stephen?" The speaker sounds jolly, excited for me. I try to say yes, I've been in a helicopter before—twice, in fact—but I can't. It's suddenly very tough to breathe. They load me into the helicopter. I can see one brilliant wedge of blue sky as we lift off, not a cloud in it. There are more radio voices. This is my afternoon for hearing voices, it seems. Meanwhile, it's getting even harder to breathe. I gesture at someone, or try to, and a face bends upside down into my field of vision.

"Feel like I'm drowning," I whisper.

Somebody checks something, and someone else says, "His lung has collapsed."

There's a rattle of paper as something is unwrapped, and then the second person speaks into my ear, loudly so as to be heard over the rotors: "We're going to put a chest tube in you, Stephen. You'll feel some pain, a little pinch. Hold on."

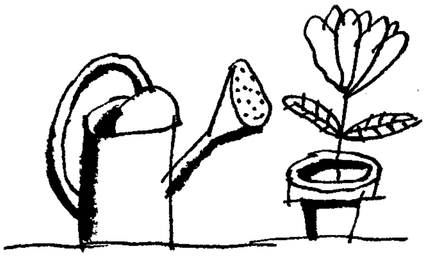
It's been my experience that if a medical person tells you that you're going to feel a little pinch he's really going to hurt you. This time, it isn't as bad as I expected, perhaps because I'm full of painkillers, perhaps because I'm on the verge of passing out again. It's like being thumped on the right side of my chest by someone holding a short sharp object. Then there's an alarming whistle, as if I'd sprung a leak. In fact, I suppose I have. A moment later, the soft in-out of normal respiration, which I've listened to my whole life (mostly without being aware of it, thank God), has been replaced by an unpleasant *shloop-shloop-shloop* sound. The air I'm taking in is very cold, but it's air, at least, and I keep breathing it. I don't want to die, and, as I lie in the helicopter looking out at the bright summer sky, I realize that I am actually lying in death's doorway. Someone is going to pull me one way or the other pretty soon; it's mostly out of my hands. All I can do is lie there and listen to my thin, leaky breathing: *shloop-shloop-shloop*.

Ten minutes later, we set down on the concrete landing pad of the Central Maine Medical Center. To me, it feels as if we're at the bottom of a concrete well. The blue sky is blotted out, and the *whap-whap-whap* of the helicopter rotors becomes magnified and echoey, like the clapping of giant hands.

Still breathing in great leaky gulps, I am lifted out of the helicopter. Someone bumps the stretcher, and I scream. "Sorry, sorry, you're O.K., Stephen," someone says—when you're badly hurt, everyone calls you by your first name.

"Tell Tabby I love her very much," I say as I am first lifted and then wheeled very fast down some sort of descending walkway. I suddenly feel like crying.

"You can tell her that yourself," the someone says. We go through a door.



There is air-conditioning, and lights flow past overhead. Doctors are paged over loudspeakers. It occurs to me, in a muddled sort of way, that just an hour ago I was taking a walk and planning to pick some berries in a field that overlooks Lake Kezar. I wasn't going to pick for long, though; I'd have to be home by five-thirty because we were going to see "The General's Daughter," starring John Travolta. Travolta played the bad guy in the movie version of "Carrie," my first novel, a long time ago.

"When?" I ask. "When can I tell her?"

"Soon," the voice says, and then I pass out again. This time, it's no splice but a great big whack taken out of the memory film; there are a few flashes, confused glimpses of faces and operating rooms and looming X-ray machinery; there are delusions and hallucinations, fed by the morphine and Dilaudid dripping into me; there are echoing voices and hands that reach down to paint my dry lips with swabs that taste of peppermint. Mostly, though, there is darkness.

Bryan Smith's estimate of my injuries turned out to be conservative. My lower leg was broken in at least nine places. The orthopedic surgeon who put me together again, the formidable David Brown, said that the region below my right knee had been reduced to "so many marbles in a sock." The extent of those lower-leg injuries necessitated two deep incisions—they're called medial and lateral fasciotomies—to release the pressure caused by my exploded tibia and also to allow blood to flow back into my lower leg. If I hadn't had the fasciotomies (or if they had been delayed), it probably would have been necessary to amputate my leg. My right knee was split almost directly down the middle, and I suffered an acetabular fracture of the right hip—a serious derailment, in other words—and an open femoral intertrochanteric fracture in the same area. My spine was chipped in eight places. Four ribs were broken. My right collarbone held, but the flesh above it had been stripped raw. The laceration in my scalp took almost thirty stitches.

Yeah, on the whole I'd say Bryan Smith was a tad conservative.

Mr. Smith's driving behavior in this case was eventually examined by a grand jury, which indicted him on two counts:

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driving to endanger (pretty serious) and aggravated assault (very serious, the kind of thing that means jail time). After due consideration, the district attorney responsible for prosecuting such cases in my corner of the world allowed Smith to plead out to the lesser charge of driving to endanger. He received six months of county jail time (sentence suspended) and a year's suspension of his right to drive. He was also placed on probation for a year, with restrictions on other motor vehicles, such as snowmobiles and A.T.V.s. Bryan Smith could conceivably be back on the road in the fall or winter of 2001.

David Brown put my leg back together in five marathon surgical procedures that left me thin, weak, and nearly at the end of my endurance. They also left me with at least a fighting chance to walk again. A large steel and carbon-fibre apparatus called an external fixator was clamped to my leg. Eight large steel pegs called Schanz pins ran through the fixator and into the bones above and below my knee. Five smaller steel rods radiated out from the knee. These looked sort of like a child's drawing of sunrays. The knee itself was locked in place. Three times a day, nurses unwrapped the smaller pins and the much larger Schanz pins and swabbed the holes with hydrogen peroxide. I've never had my leg dipped in kerosene and then lit on fire, but if that ever happens I'm sure it will feel quite a bit like daily pin care.

I entered the hospital on June 19th. Around the thirtieth, I got up for the first time, staggering three steps to a commode, where I sat with my hospital johnny in my lap and my head down, trying not to weep and failing. I told myself that I had been lucky, incredibly lucky, and usually that worked, because it was true. Sometimes it didn't work, that's all—and then I cried.

A day or two after those initial steps, I started physical therapy. During my first session, I managed ten steps in a downstairs corridor, lurching along with the help of a walker. One other patient was learning to walk again at the same time as me, a wispy eighty-year-old woman named Alice, who was recovering from a stroke. We cheered each other on when we had enough breath to do so. On our third day in the hall, I told Alice that her slip was showing.

"Your ass is showing, sonny boy," she wheezed, and kept going.

By July 4th, I was able to sit up in a wheelchair long enough to go out to the loading dock behind the hospital and watch the fireworks. It was a fiercely hot night, the streets filled with people eating snacks, drinking beer and soda, watching the sky. Tabby stood next to me, holding my hand, as the sky lit up red and green, blue and yellow. She was staying in a condo apartment across the street from the hospital, and each morning she brought me poached eggs and tea. I could use the nourishment, it seemed. In 1997, I weighed two hundred and sixteen pounds. On the day that I was released from Central Maine Medical Center, I weighed a hundred and sixty-five.

I came home to Bangor on July 9th, after a hospital stay of three weeks, and began a daily-rehabilitation program that included stretching, bending, and crutch-walking. I tried to keep my courage and my spirits up. On August 4th, I went back to C.M.M.C. for another operation. When I woke up this time, the Schanz pins in my upper thigh were gone. Dr. Brown pronounced my recovery "on course" and sent me home for more rehab and physical therapy. (Those of us undergoing P.T. know that the letters actually stand for Pain and Torture.) And in the midst of all this something else happened.

On July 24th, five weeks after Bryan Smith hit me with his Dodge van, I began to write again.

I didn't want to go back to work. I was in a lot of pain, unable to bend my right knee. I couldn't imagine sitting behind a desk for long, even in a wheelchair. Because of my cataclysmically smashed hip, sitting was torture after forty minutes or so, impossible after an hour and a quarter. How was I supposed to write when the most pressing thing in my world was how long until the next dose of Percocet?

Yet, at the same time, I felt that I was all out of choices. I had been in terrible situations before, and writing had helped me get over them—had helped me to forget myself, at least for a little while. Perhaps it would help me again. It seemed ridiculous to think it might be so, given the level of my pain and physical incapacitation, but there was that voice in the back of my mind, patient and implacable, telling me that, in the words of the Chambers Brothers, the "time has come today." It was possible for me to disobey that voice but very difficult not to believe it.

In the end, it was Tabby who cast the deciding vote, as she so often has at crucial moments. The former Tabitha Spruce is the person in my life who's most likely to say that I'm working too hard, that it's time to slow down, but she also knows that sometimes it's the work that bails me out. For me, there have been times when the act of writing has been an act of faith,

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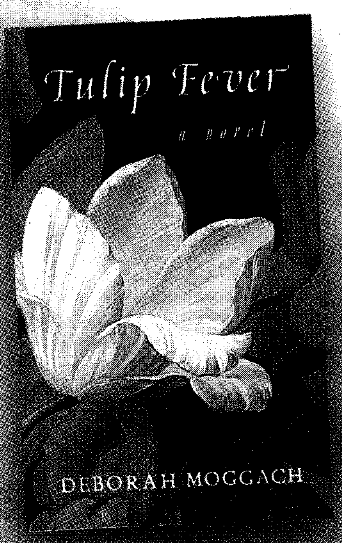

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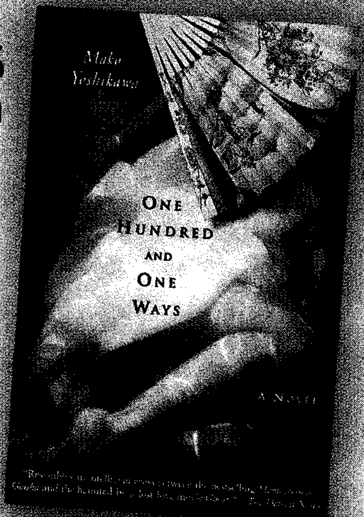

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a spit in the eye of despair. Writing is not life, but I think that sometimes it can be a way back to life. When I told Tabby on that July morning that I thought I'd better go back to work, I expected a lecture. Instead, she asked me where I wanted to set up. I told her I didn't know, hadn't even thought about it.

For years after we were married, I had dreamed of having the sort of massive oak-slab desk that would dominate a room—no more child's desk in a trailer closet, no more cramped kneehole in a rented house. In 1981, I had found that desk and placed it in a spacious, skylighted study in a converted stable loft at the rear of our new house. For six years, I had sat behind that desk either drunk or wrecked out of my mind, like a ship's captain in charge of a voyage to nowhere. Then, a year or two after I sobered up, I got rid of it and put in a living-room suite where it had been. In the early nineties, before my kids had moved on to their own lives, they sometimes came up there in the evening to watch a basketball game or a movie and eat a pizza. They usually left a boxful of crusts behind, but I didn't care. I got another desk—handmade, beautiful, and half the size of my original T. rex—and I put it at the far-west end of the office, in a corner under the eave. Now, in my wheelchair, I had no way to get to it.

Tabby thought about it for a moment and then said, "I can rig a table for you in the back hall, outside the pantry. There are plenty of outlets—you can have your Mac, the little printer, and a fan." The fan was a must—it had been a terrifically hot summer, and on the day I went back to work the temperature outside was ninety-five. It wasn't much cooler in the back hall.

Tabby spent a couple of hours putting things together, and that afternoon she rolled me out through the kitchen and down the newly installed wheelchair ramp into the back hall. She had made me a wonderful little nest there: laptop and printer connected side by side, table lamp, manuscript (with my notes from the month before placed neatly on top), pens, and reference materials. On the corner of the desk was a framed picture of our younger son, which she had taken earlier that summer.

"Is it all right?" she asked.

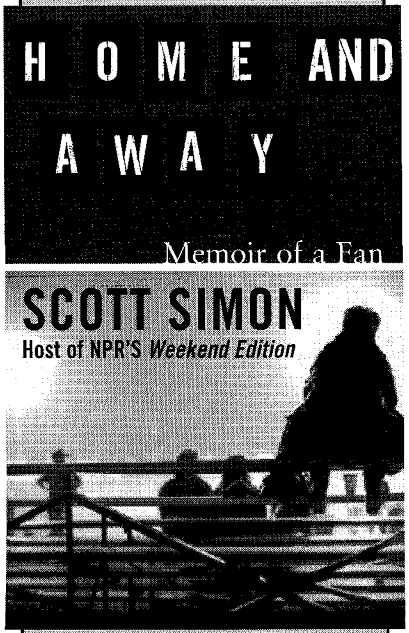
"It's gorgeous," I said.

She got me positioned at the table, kissed me on the temple, and then left me there to find out if I had anything left to say. It turned out I did, a little. That first session lasted an hour and forty minutes, by far the longest period I'd spent upright since being struck by Smith's van. When it was over, I was dripping with sweat and almost too exhausted to sit up straight in my wheelchair. The pain in my hip was just short of apocalyptic. And the first five hundred words were uniquely terrifying—it was as if I'd never written anything before in my life. I stepped from one word to the next like a very old man finding his way across a stream on a zigzag line of wet stones.

Tabby brought me a Pepsi—cold and sweet and good—and as I drank it I looked around and had to laugh despite the pain. I'd written "Carrie" and "Salem's Lot" in the laundry room of a rented trailer. The back hall of our house resembled it enough to make me feel as if I'd come full circle.

There was no miraculous breakthrough that afternoon, unless it was the ordinary miracle that comes with any attempt to create something. All I know is that the words started coming a little faster after a while, then a little faster still. My hip still hurt, my back still hurt, my leg, too, but those hurts began to seem a little farther away. I'd got going; there was that much. After that, things could only get better.

Things have continued to get better. I've had two more operations on my leg since that first sweltering afternoon in the back hall. I've also had a fairly serious bout of infection, and I still take roughly a hundred pills a day, but the external fixator is now gone and I continue to write. On some days, that writing is a pretty grim slog. On others—more and more of them, as my mind reaccustoms itself to its old routine—I feel that buzz of happiness, that sense of having found the right words and put them in a line. It's like lifting off in an airplane: you're on the ground, on the ground, on the ground . . . and then you're up, riding on a cushion of air and the prince of all you survey. I still don't have much strength—I can do a little less than half of what I used to be able to do in a day—but I have enough. Writing did not save my life, but it is doing what it has always done: it makes my life a brighter and more pleasant place. ♦



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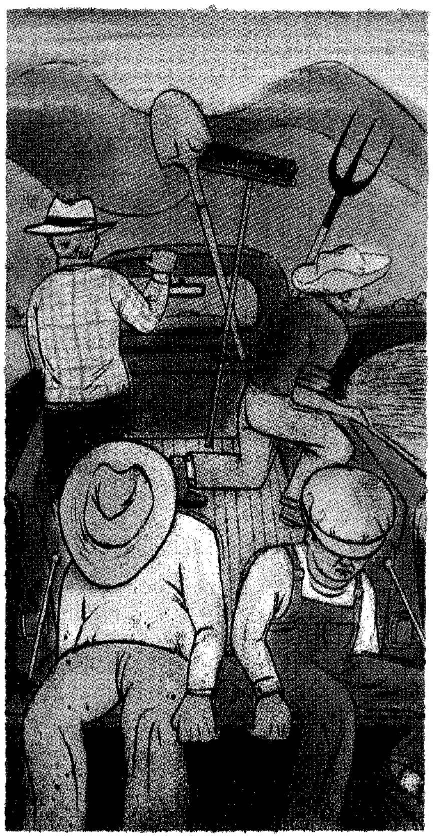
NOTEBOOK

IN THE HAY

A summer job remembered.

BY TOBIAS WOLFF

In the summer of 1959, when I was fourteen, I worked on the farms along the Skagit River, northeast of Seattle, hitchhiking up and down the valley to pick berries and muck out stables for minimum wage, until I found a job where the farmer paid me a little better and treated me well, and I stayed on there until school started. While I shovelled shit or hacked weeds out of a drainage ditch, I'd sometimes stop to watch the hands in the distant fields bucking bales of hay into a wagon, stacking them to teetering heights. Now and then, a tag end of conversation or a bark of laughter would reach me on the breeze. The farmer wouldn't let me work in the hay because I was too small, but I beefed up over the winter, and the following summer he let me join the crew.



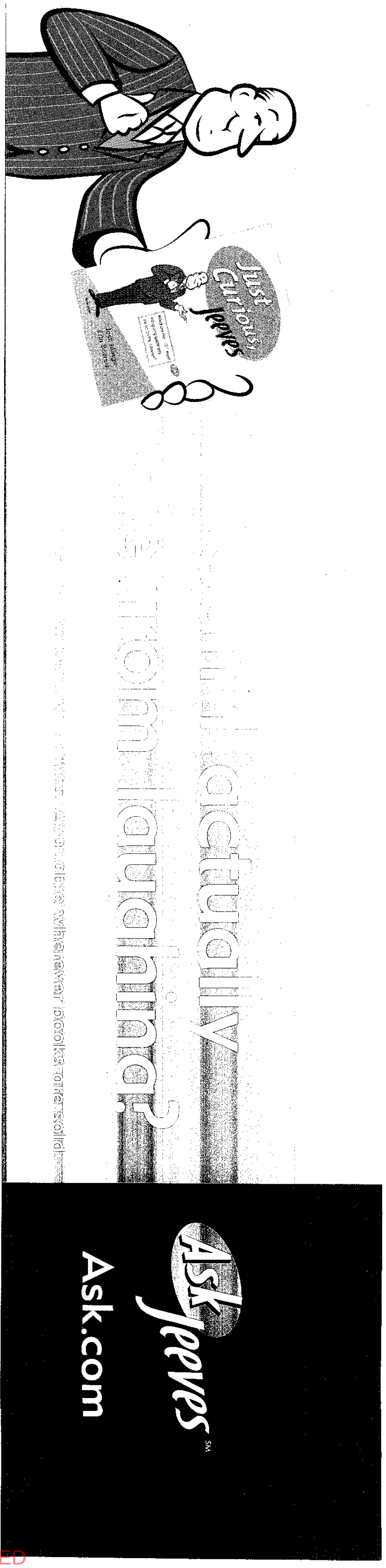
EDEL RODRIGUEZ

Having a summer job delivered you from the reach of parents, from the caustic scrutiny of friends. It set you free among strangers in the eventful world, where you could practice being someone else until you *were* someone else. It put money in your pocket and allowed you to believe that your other life—your inessential, parenthetical life, at home and at school—was just a sop to those deluded enough to imagine that you still needed them.

There were four of us working the hay on this particular farm: the farmer's nephew, Clemson, to whom I condescended because he was a naïve, inexperienced boy, and two Mexican brothers, Miguel and Eduardo. Miguel, short and stolid and solitary, spoke very little English, and rakish Eduardo did the talking for both of them and then some. While the rest of us did the heavy work, Eduardo gave us advice about girls and told stories in which he featured as a trickster and a deft, indefatigable swordsman. He played it for laughs, but in the very materials of his narrative—the larcenous border guards, the clod-brained farmers and their insatiable wives, the bumbling cops, and the whores who loved him—I felt the actuality of a life I knew nothing about but somehow contrived to want for myself: a real life in a real world.

The farmer had a lot of hay to bring in, and he should have hired more hands. He pushed us hard and made us work long hours. During the last week or so, I spent the nights with Clemson's family, just down the road, so that I could get to the farm with the others at sunup and work until dusk. The bales were heavy with dew when we started bringing them in. The air in the loft turned steamy from fermentation, and Eduardo warned the farmer that the hay might combust, but he held us to his schedule. I was sunburned, covered with scratches. I could hardly get out of bed in the morning. But although I griped with the others, I was secretly glad to take my place beside them, to work as they did, as if I had no choice.

Eduardo's car broke down toward the



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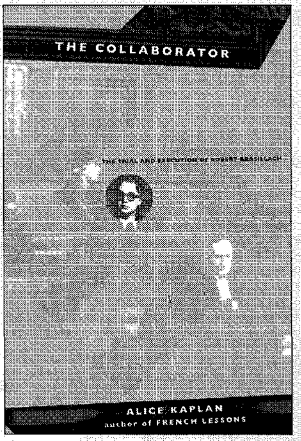

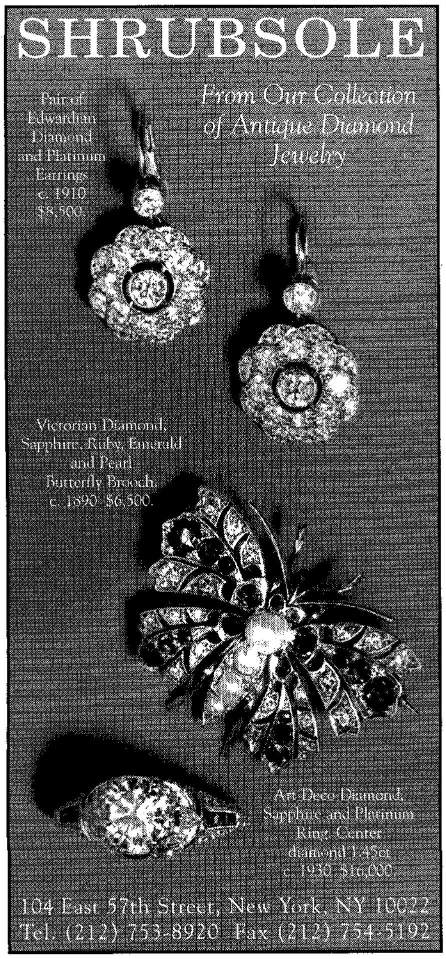
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end of the week, and Clemson started driving him and Miguel to and from the decrepit motel where they lived with other seasonal workers. One night, when we took them home, Eduardo asked us in for a drink. Clemson tried to beg off, but I wouldn't let him. Though their beds were made and their clothes neatly folded, the room itself was a ruin, and, as fastidious Clemson writhed in distress, I made a show of being right at home.

We drank rye, and listened to Eduardo, and within an hour we were all drunk. Then someone came to the door and said something in Spanish, and Eduardo went outside and didn't come back. Miguel and I kept drinking. Clemson was half asleep, his chin declining slowly toward his chest and then snapping up again. Miguel looked at me hard, without blinking his narrow eyes, and began to describe an injustice done to him by our boss, or maybe another boss. I could barely understand his English, and he kept breaking into Spanish, which I didn't understand at all. But he was angry—I understood that.

Then he went across the room and came back and put a pistol on the table. It was a revolver, with most of the bluing worn off. He looked at me over the pistol and resumed his complaint, entirely in Spanish. He was looking at me, but I knew that he was seeing someone else. I had rarely heard him speak before. Now the words poured out in an aggrieved singsong, and I saw that his own voice was lashing him on somehow, that it was making him hate whoever he thought I was. I saw the room I was in. I knew this was just the kind of room that a foolish boy might be killed in, and it seemed that this would soon happen to me, and I was too afraid even to speak.

Then Clemson stood up, bent forward, and puked on the table. Miguel stopped talking. He stared at Clemson as if he'd never seen him before, and when Clemson began retching again Miguel jumped up, grabbed him, and pushed him toward the door. I took hold of Clemson and helped him outside while Miguel looked on, shrieking his disgust. Oh, how sweetly I tended Clemson that night! I thought that he had saved my life. And maybe he had.

That winter, the farmer's barn burned to the ground. When I heard about it, I said, "I told him, I told the stupid sumbitch not to put up wet hay." ♦

Candice Bergen 6/1 Princess Margaret 6/2 Mark Goodson 6/3 Morgan Fairchild 6/5 Clint Black 6/6

Vivien Leigh 6/7 Dick Powell 6/8 Gerald Ford 6/9 Lowell Thomas 6/10 Sally Field 6/12 Hulk Hogan 6/13 Deborah Kerr 6/14 Hedda Hopper 6/15 George VI 6/16

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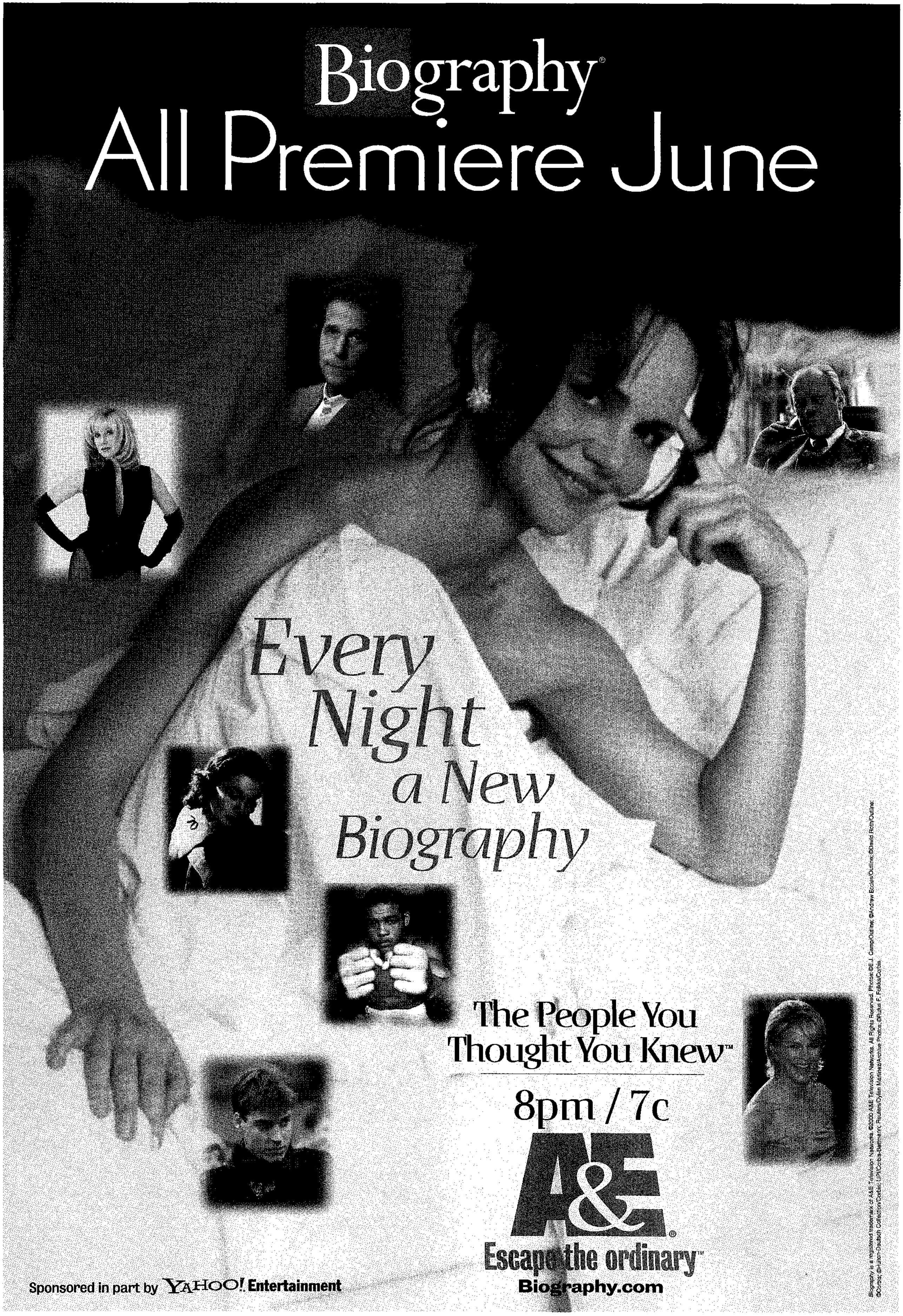

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LETTER FROM INDIA

A DREAM OF GLORIOUS RETURN

BY SALMAN RUSHDIE

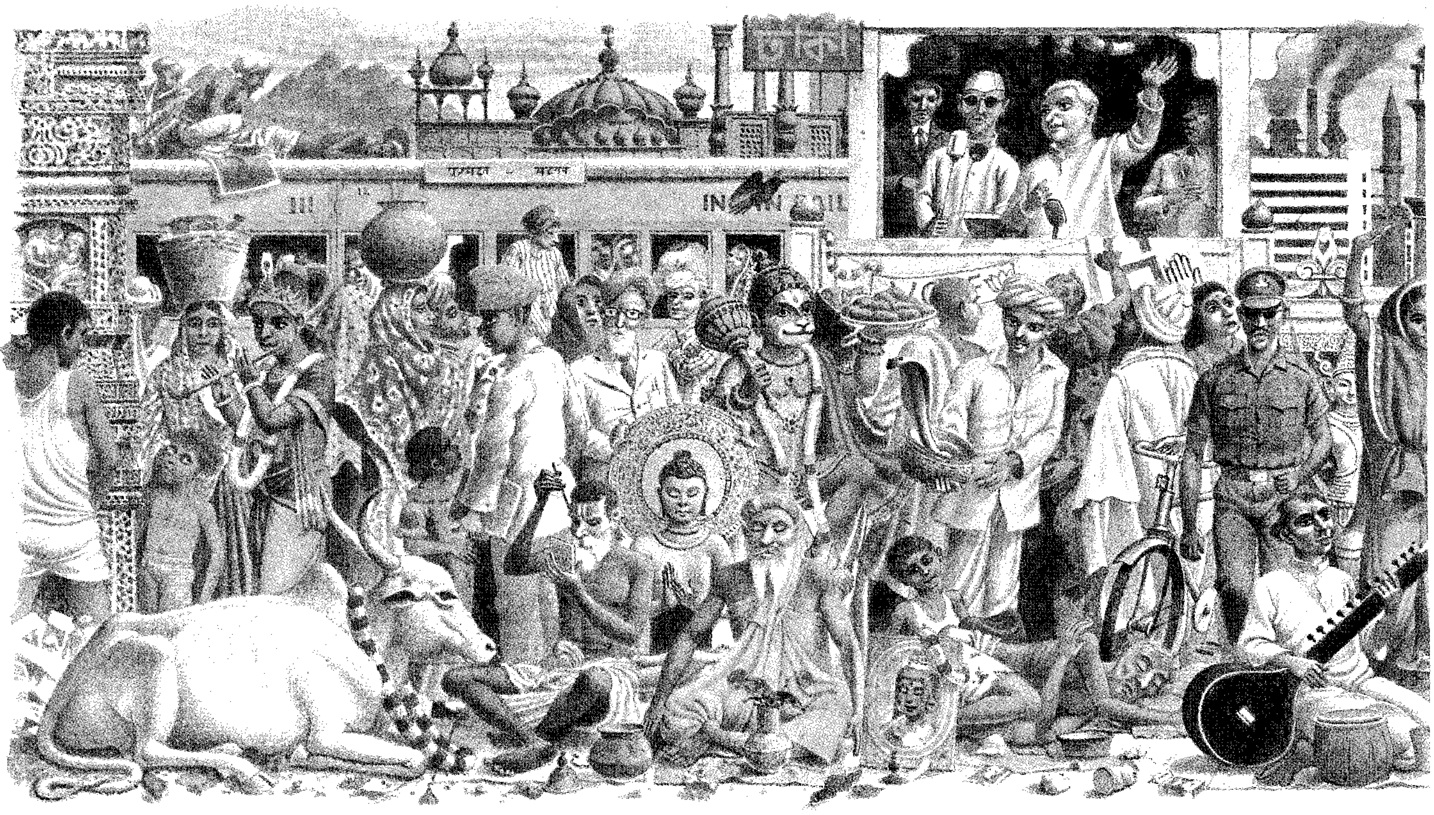
Thursday, April 6th: I have left India many times. The first time was when I was thirteen and went to boarding school in Rugby, England. My mother didn't want me to go but I said I did. I flew west excitedly in January, 1961, not really knowing that I was taking a step that would change my life forever. A few years later, my father, without telling me, suddenly sold Windsor Villa, our family home in Bombay. The day I heard this, I felt an abyss open beneath my feet. I think that I never forgave my father for selling that house, and I'm sure that if he hadn't I would still be living in it. Since then the characters in my fiction have frequently flown west from India, but in novel after novel their author's imagination has returned to it. This, perhaps, is what it means to love a country: that its shape is also yours, the shape of the way you think and feel and dream. That you can never really leave.

Before the Partition massacres of 1947, my parents left Delhi and moved south, correctly calculating that there would be less trouble in secular, cosmopolitan Bombay. As a result, I grew up in that tolerant, broadminded city whose particular quality—call it freedom—I've been trying to capture and celebrate ever since. "Midnight's Children," which was published in 1981, was my first attempt at such literary land reclamation. Living in London, I wanted to get India back; and the delight with which Indian readers clasped the book to themselves, the passion with which they, in turn, claimed me, remains the most precious memory of my writing life.

In 1988, I was planning to buy myself a place in Bombay with the advance I'd received for my new novel. But that novel was "The Satanic Verses," and after it was published the world changed for me, and I was no longer able to set foot in the country that has been my primary source of artistic inspiration. Whenever I made inquiries about getting a visa (although I was born an Indian national, I now have a British passport), word invariably came back that I would not be granted one. Nothing about my plague years, the dark decade that followed Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa, has hurt more than this rift. I felt like a jilted lover, left alone with his unbearable love.

It has been a deep rift. India was the first country to ban "The Satanic Verses"; the book was proscribed without due process before it entered the country, by a weak Congress government led by Rajiv Gandhi, in a desperate, unsuccessful bid for Muslim votes. After that, it sometimes seemed as if the Indian authorities were determined to rub salt in the wound. And the ban on "The Satanic Verses" is, of course, still in place.

After the September 24, 1998, agreement between the British and the Iranian governments, which effectively set aside the Khomeini fatwa, things be-



PAUL BIRKBECK

In April, the author returned to his native country for the first time since Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death sentence against him. "I gan to change for me in India, too, and I was granted a five-year visa. At once, there were threats from Muslim hard-liners like Imam Bukhari, of the Delhi Jama Masjid, and, more worryingly, some commentators told me not to visit India, because if I did so I might look like a pawn of the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party government, the B.J.P. I have never been a B.J.P. man, but that wouldn't stop the Party from using me for its own sectarian ends.

"Exile," I wrote in "The Satanic Verses," "is a dream of glorious return." But the dream fades, the imagined return stops feeling glorious. The dreamer awakes. I almost gave up on India, almost believed the love affair was over for good. But not so. As it turns out, I'm about to leave for Delhi after a gap of twelve and a half years. My son Zafar, twenty, is coming with me. He hasn't been to India since he was three, and is very excited. Compared to me, however, he's the picture of coolness and calm.

Friday, April 7th: The telephone rings. The Delhi police are extremely nervous about my impending arrival. Can I please avoid being spotted on the plane? My bald head is very recognizable; will I please wear a hat? My eyes are also easily identified; will I please wear sunglasses? Oh, and my beard, too, is a real giveaway; will I wear a scarf around that?

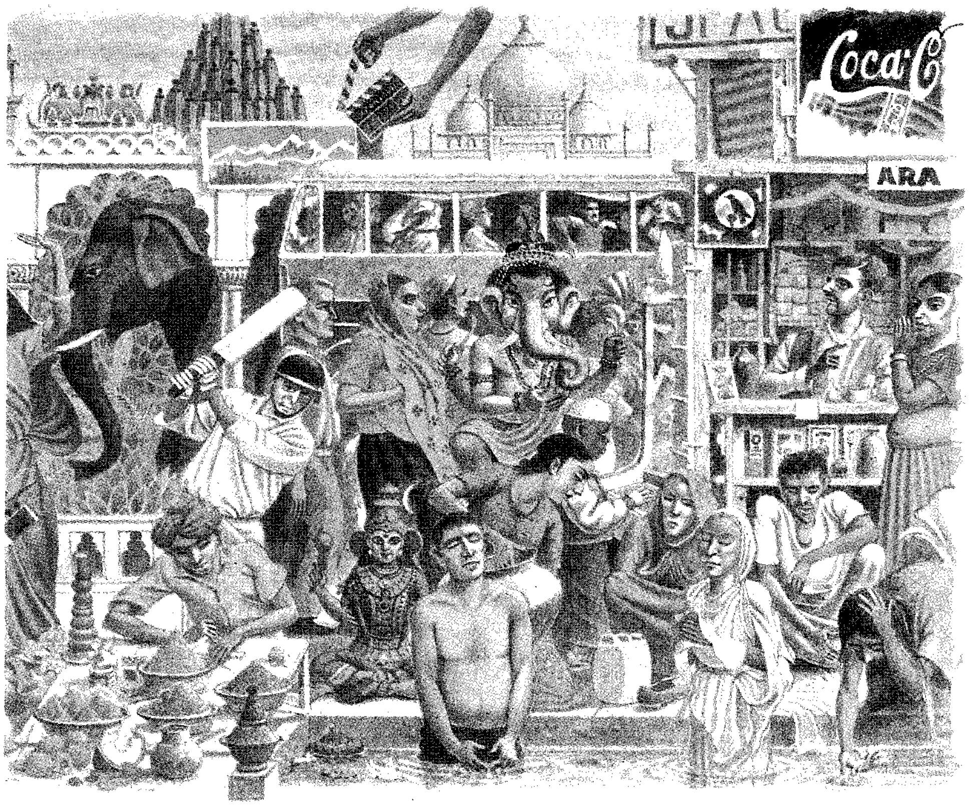
The temperature in India is close to a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, I point out: a scarf might prove a little warm.

Oh, but there are cotton scarves.

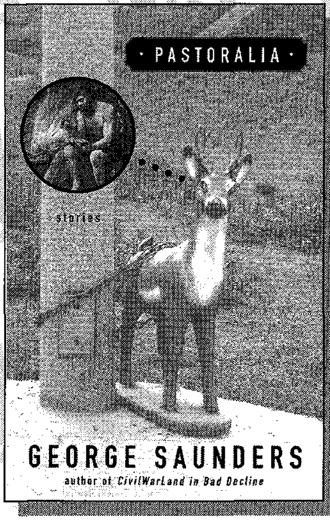
I'm going to India because things are better now and because if I don't go I'll never know if it's O.K. to go or not. I'm going because, in spite of everything that has happened between India and myself, the hook of love is in too deeply to pull out. Most of all, I'm going because Zafar asked to come with me. High time he was reintroduced to his other country.

So: I fly to Delhi, and nobody sees me do it. Here's the invisible man in his Business Class seat. Here he is, watching the new Pedro Almodóvar movie on a little pop-up screen, while the plane flies over, er, Iran. Here's the invisible man sleep-masked and snoring.

I feel an urge to kiss the ground, or, rather, the blue rug in the airport "finger," but am embarrassed to do so beneath the watchful eyes of a small army



almost gave up on India, almost believed the love affair was over for good. But not so."



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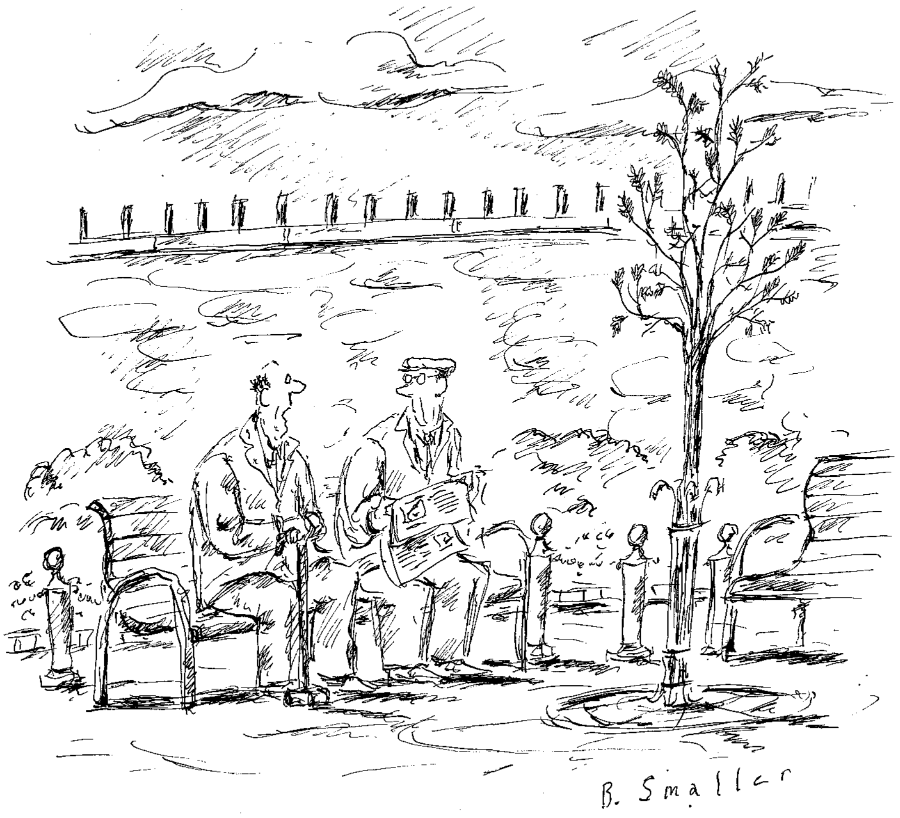


"My goal is to die before there's a technology breakthrough that forces me to live to a hundred and thirty."

of security guards. Leaving the rug unkissed, I move out of the terminal into the blazing, bone-dry Delhi heat, so different from the wet-towel humidity of my native Bombay. The hot day enfolds us like an embrace. We climb into a cramped, white Hindustan Ambassador, a car that is itself a blast from the past, the British Morris Oxford, long defunct in Britain, but alive and well here in this Indian translation. The Ambassador's air-conditioning system isn't working. I'm back.

Saturday, April 8th: India rushes in from every direction, thrusting me into the middle of its unending argument, clamoring for my total attention. Buy Chilly cockroach traps! Drink Hello mineral water! Speed Thrills But Kills! shout the hoardings. There are new kinds of message, too. Enroll for Oracle 81. Graduate with Java. And, as proof that the long protectionist years are over, Coca-Cola is back with a vengeance. When I was last here it was banned, leaving the field clear for the disgusting local imitations, Campa Cola and Thums Up. Now there's a red Coke ad every hundred yards or so. Coke's slogan of the moment is written in Hindi transliterated into Roman script: Jo Chaho Ho Jaaye. Which could be translated, literally, as "Whatever you desire, let it come to pass."

"Horn Please" demand the signs on the backs of a million trucks blocking the road. All the other trucks, and cars, bikes, motor scooters, taxis, and phut-phut autorickshaws enthusiastically respond, welcoming Zafar and me with an energetic rendition of the traditional symphony of the Indian street.

Wait for Side! Sorry-Bye-Bye! Fatta Boy!

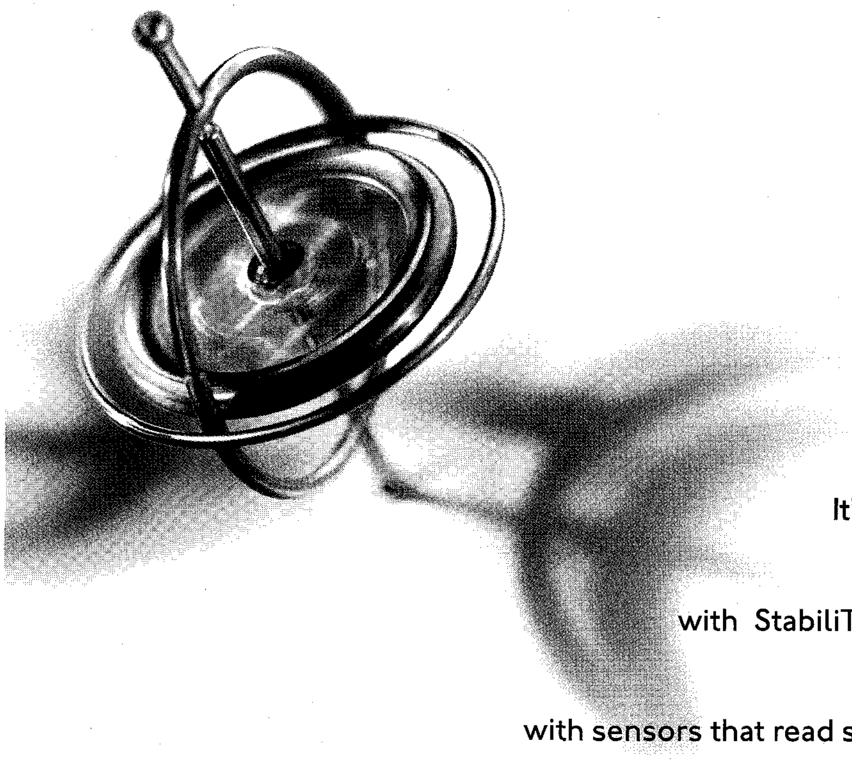
The news is just as cacophonous. Between India and Pakistan, as usual, acrimony reigns. Pakistan's ex-Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif has just been sentenced to life imprisonment after what looked very like a show trial stage-managed by the latest military strongman to seize power. India's army of vociferous commentators, linking this story to the unveiling by Pakistan of a new missile, warn darkly of the worsening relations between the two countries. *Plus ça change.*

I've been back only for an instant, and already everyone I talk to is regaling me with opinions on the new shape of Indian politics. If Bombay is India's New York—glamorous, glitzy, vulgar-chic, a merchant city, a movie city, a slum city, incredibly rich, hideously poor—then Delhi is its Washington. Politics is the only game in town. Nobody talks about anything else for very long.

Once, India's minorities looked for protection to the left-leaning Congress Party, then the country's only organized political machine. Now the disarray of the Party—and its drift to the right—is everywhere apparent. Under the leadership of Sonia Gandhi, the once mighty machine languishes and rusts. People who have known Sonia for years urge me not to swallow the line that she was never interested in politics and allowed herself to be drafted into the leadership only because of her concern for the Party. They paint a portrait of a woman completely seduced by power but unable to wield it, lacking the skill, charm, vision, indeed everything except the hunger for power itself. Around her fawn the courtiers of the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty, working to prevent the emergence of new leaders who just might have the freshness and will to revive the Party's fortunes but who cannot be permitted to usurp the leadership role that, in the Sonia clique's view, belongs to her and her children alone.

I was last in India in August, 1987, for the fortieth anniversary of Independence. I have never forgotten being at the Red Fort, in Old Delhi, and listening to Rajiv Gandhi delivering a stunningly tedious oration in broken schoolboy Hindi, while the audience simply and crushingly walked away. Now, here on television, is his widow, her Hindi even more broken than his, a woman convinced of her right to rule but convincing almost nobody except herself.

I remember another widow I met during that 1987 visit, a Sikh, Ravel Kaur, who had seen her husband and sons murdered before her eyes by gangs



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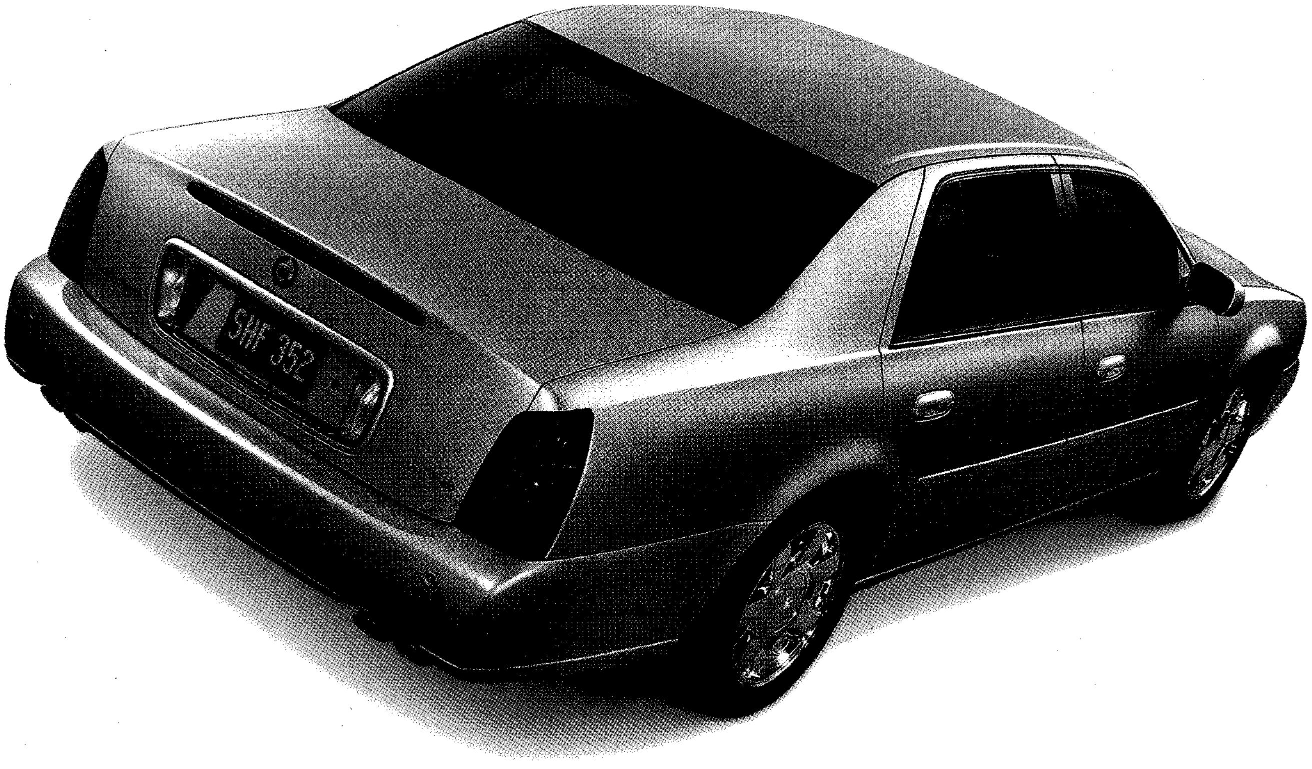

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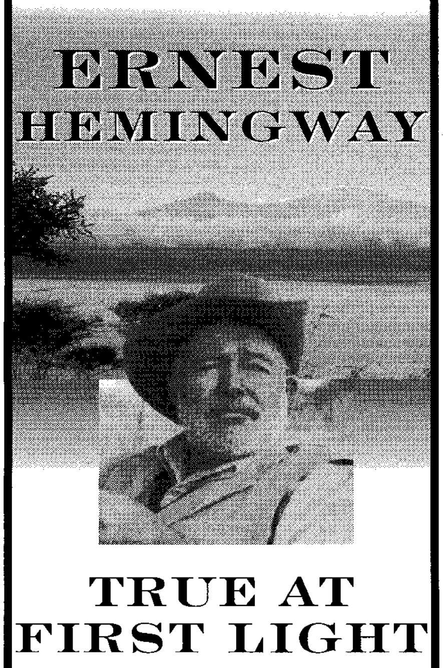

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known to be led and organized by Congress people. Indira Gandhi had recently been assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards, and the whole Sikh community of Delhi was paying the price. The Rajiv Gandhi government prosecuted nobody for these murders, in spite of much hard evidence identifying many of the killers.

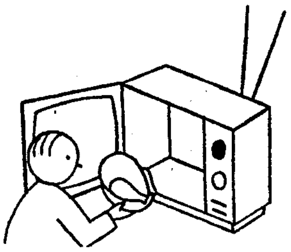
For my friend Vijay Shankardass, who had known Rajiv for years, those were disillusioning days. Vijay is one of the most distinguished attorneys in India, with a proud history of anti-censorship victories to his name. He and his wife hid their Sikh neighbors in their own home to keep them safe. He went to see Rajiv to demand that something be done to stop the killings, and was deeply shocked by Rajiv's seeming indifference: "Salman, he was so calm." One of Rajiv's close aides, Arjun Das, was less placid. "*Saalõn ko phoonk do*," he snarled. "Blow the bastards away." Later, he, too, was killed.

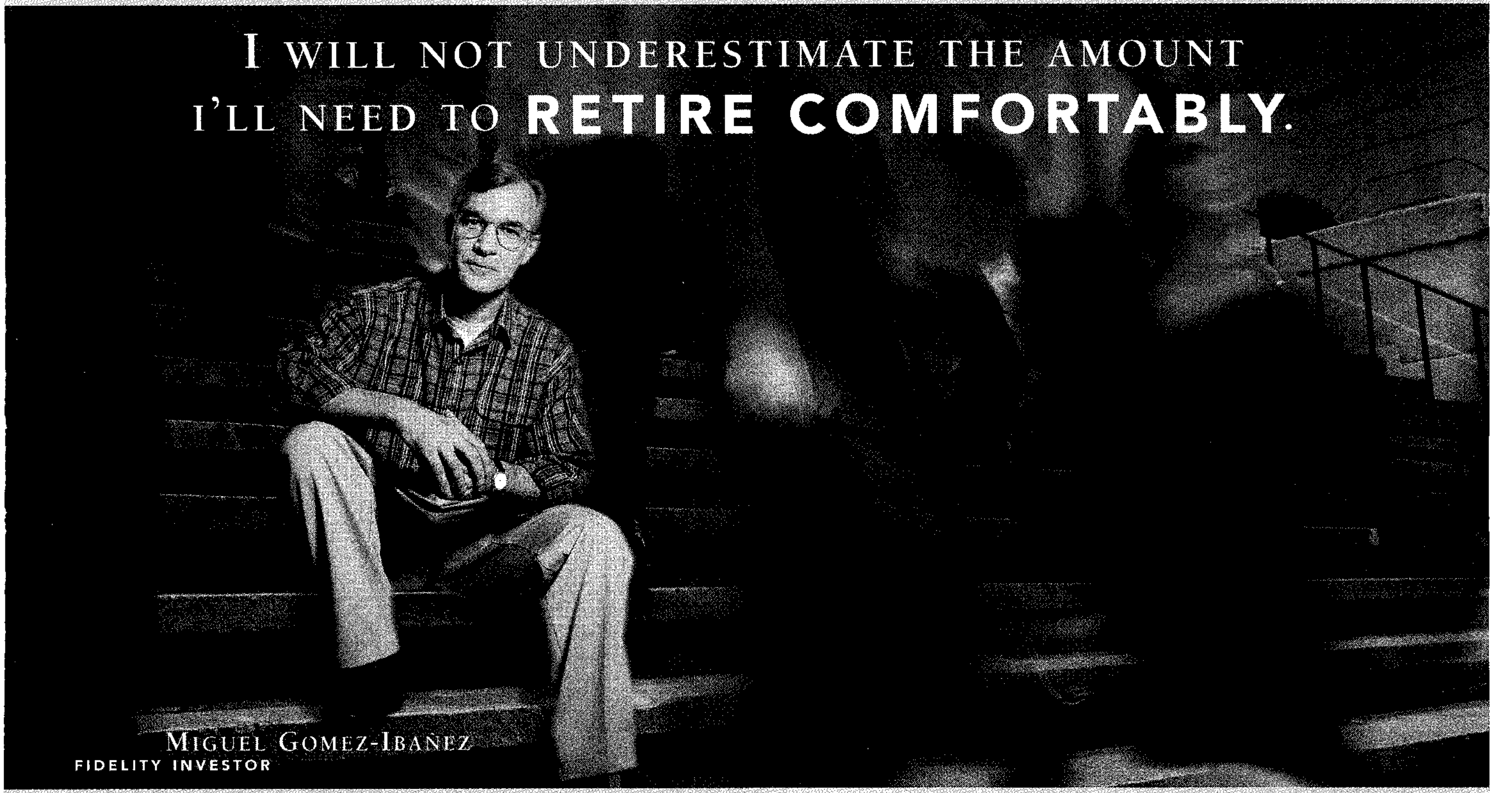
The Congress Party has strange bedfellows these days. Its decay can perhaps best be measured by the poor quality of its allies. In the state of Bihar, these include the bizarre political double act of Laloo Prasad Yadav and his wife, Rabri Devi. Some years ago, Laloo, then state Chief Minister, was implicated in the Fodder Scam, a swindle in which large amounts of public subsidies were claimed for the maintenance of cows that didn't actually exist. Laloo was jailed, but first managed to make his wife the Chief Minister, and blithely went on running the state, by proxy, from his prison cell.

Since then, he has been in and out of the clink (though never convicted). At present, he's inside, and his wife is at least technically still in the driver's seat, and another juicy corruption scandal is emerging. The tax authorities want to know how Laloo and Rabri manage to live in such high style (they have a particularly grand house) on the relatively humble salaries that even senior ministers in India pull down. Laloo and Rabri were, very loosely, the models for the wholly fictitious and wildly corrupt Bombay politicians Piloo and Golmatol Doodhwala in my novel "The Ground Beneath Her Feet." In the novel, Piloo, India's "Scambaba Deluxe," runs a scheme that involves claiming public subsidies for nonexistent goats.

Sunday, April 9th: Zafar at twenty is a big, gentle young man who, unlike his father, keeps his emotions concealed. But he is a deeply feeling fellow, and is engaging with India seriously, attentively, beginning the process of making his own portrait of it, which may unlock in him an as yet unknown other self. At first, he notices what first-time visitors notice: the poverty of the families living by the railway tracks in what look like trash cans and bin liners, the men holding hands in the street, the "terrible" quality of Indian MTV, and the "awful" Bollywood movies. We pass through the sprawling Army cantonment, and he asks if the armed forces are as much of a political factor here as they are in neighboring Pakistan, and looks impressed when I tell him that the Indian Army has never sought political power.

I can't tempt him into Indian national dress. I myself put on a cool, loose kurta-pajama outfit the moment I arrive, but Zafar is mutinous. "It's just not my style," he insists, preferring to stay in his young Londoner's uniform of T-shirt, cargo pants, and sneakers. (By the end of the trip, he is wearing the white pajamas but not the kurta; still, progress of a kind has been made.) Zafar has never read more than the first three chapters of "Midnight's Children," in spite of its dedication ("For Zafar Rushdie who, contrary to all expectations, was born in the afternoon"). In fact, apart from "Haroun and the Sea of Stories" and the story collection "East, West," he hasn't finished any of my books. The children of writers are often this way. They need their parents to be parents, not novelists. Zafar has always had a complete set of my books proudly on display in his room, but he reads Alex Garland and Bill Bryson,

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SUCCOR

Refugees, derelicts—but why classify
people in the wreck of their terms?
These wear mixed and accidental clothing
and are seated at long tables in rows.

It's been like a school, and the lesson
has moved now from papers to round
volumes of steaming food
which they seem to treat like knowledge,

relearning it slowly, copying it
into themselves with hesitant spoons.

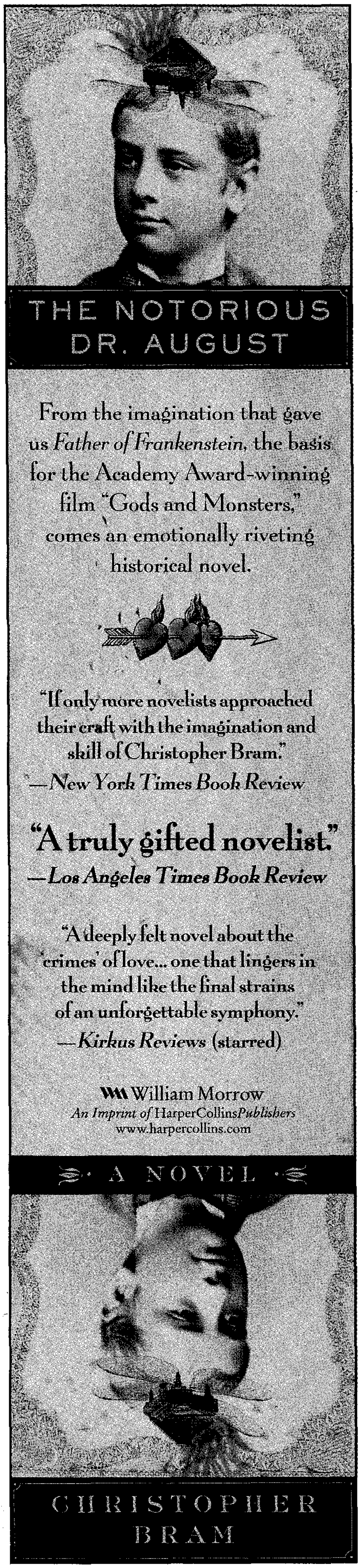
—*Les Murray*

and I pretend not to care. Now, poor fellow, he's getting a crash course in my work as well as in my life. In the Red Fort after Partition, my aunt and uncle, like many Muslims, had to be protected by the Army from the violence raging outside; a version of this appears in my novel "Shame." And here, off Chandni Chowk, the bustling main street of Old Delhi, are the lanes winding into the old Muslim *mohallas* (or neighborhoods), where my parents lived before they moved to Bombay. It's also where Ahmed and Amina Sinai, the parents of the narrator of "Midnight's Children," faced the gathering pre-Independence storm. Zafar takes all this literary tourism in good part. Look, here at Purana Qila, the Old Fort supposedly built on the site of the legendary city of Indraprastha, is where Ahmed Sinai left a sack of money to appease a gang of arsonist blackmailers. Look, there are the monkeys who ripped up the sack and threw the money away. Look, here at the National Gallery of Modern Art are the paintings of Amrita Sher-Gil, the half-Indian, half-Hungarian artist who inspired the character of Aurora Zogoiby in "The Moor's Last Sigh"... O.K., enough, Dad, he plainly thinks but is too nice to say. O.K., I'll read them, this time I really will. (He probably won't.)

There are signs at the Red Fort advertising an evening son-et-lumière show. "If Mum was here," he says suddenly, "she'd insist on coming to that." Zafar's bright, beautiful mother, my first wife, Clarissa Luard, the Arts Council of England's highly esteemed senior literature officer, who was the guardian angel of young writers and little magazines, died of a recurrence of breast cancer last November, aged just fifty. Zafar and I had spent most of her final hours by her bedside. He is her only child.

"Well," I say, "she was here, you know." In 1974, Clarissa and I spent more than four months travelling around India, roughing it in cheap hotels and long-distance buses, using the advance I'd received for my first novel, "Grimus," to finance the trip, and trying to stretch the money as far as it would go. Now I begin to make a point of telling Zafar what his mother thought of this or that—how much she liked the serenity of this spot, or the hubbub over there. What began as a little father-and-son expedition acquires an extra dimension.

I've always known that this first visit would be the trickiest. Don't overreach yourself, I thought. If it goes well, things should ease. The second visit? "Rushdie returns again" isn't much of a news story. And the third—"Oh, here he is once more"—barely sounds like news at all. In the long slog back to "normality," habituation, even boredom, has been a useful weapon. "I intend," I start telling people in India, "to bore India into submission." Things have improved in England and Amer-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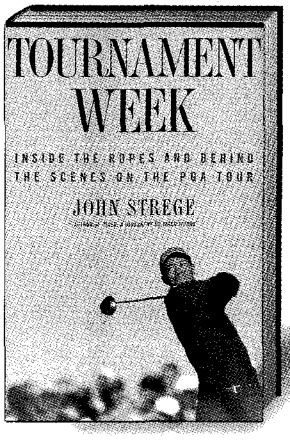
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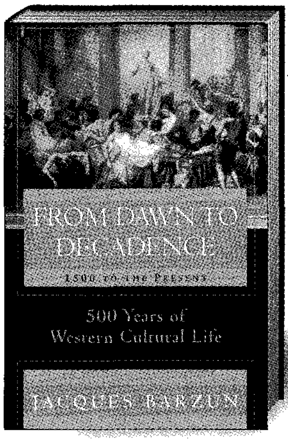
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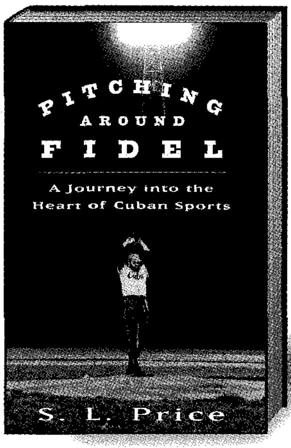
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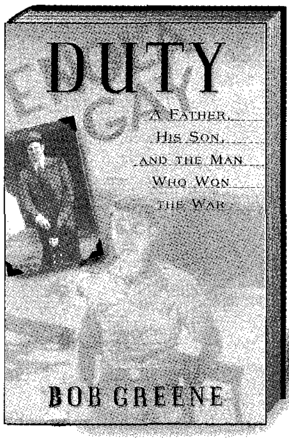
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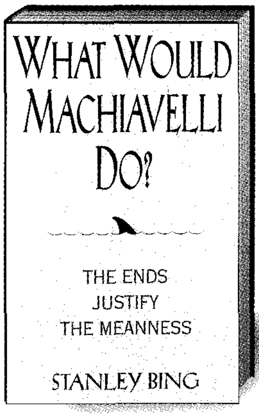
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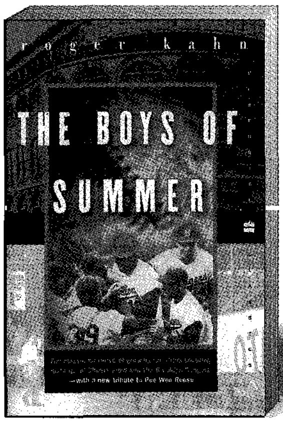
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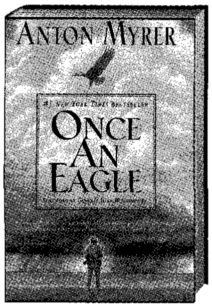
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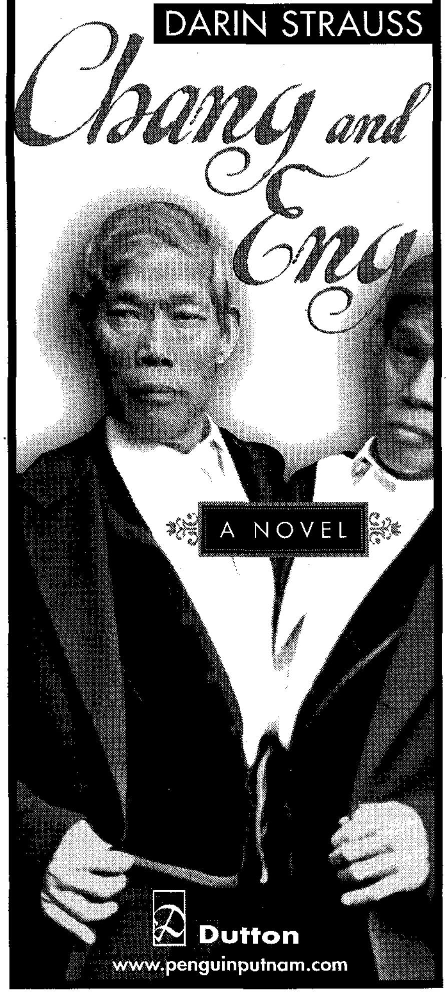
DARIN STRAUSS



ica, and I have grown unaccustomed to the problems of having to be protected. What's happening in India feels, in this regard, like entering a time warp and being taken back to the bad old early days of the Iranian attack.

My protection team couldn't be nicer or more efficient, but, gosh, there are a lot of them, and they are jumpy. In Old Delhi, where many Muslims live, they are especially on edge, particularly whenever, in spite of my cloak of invisibility, a member of the public commits the faux pas of recognizing me.

"Sir, there has been exposure! Exposure has occurred!" my protectors mourn.

"Sir, they have said the name, sir! The name has been spoken!"

"Sir, please, the hat!"

It's useless to point out that I do tend to get recognized a fair bit, because, well, I look like this and other people don't; or that, on every single "exposure," the reaction of the persons concerned has been friendly. My protectors have a nightmare scenario in their heads—rioting mobs, etc.—and mere real life isn't enough to wipe it away. This has been one of the most frustrating aspects of the last few years. People—journalists, policemen, friends, strangers—all write scripts for me, and I get trapped inside those fantasies. What none of the scenarists ever seem to come up with is the possibility of a happy ending—one in which the problems I've faced are gradually overcome, and I resume the ordinary literary life, which is all I've ever wanted. Yet this, the wholly unanticipated story line, is what has actually happened. My biggest problem these days is waiting for everyone to let go of their nightmares and catch up with the facts.

I dine with the artist Vivan Sundaram and Geeta Kapur, at their home in the Shanti Niketan district of South Delhi. Vivan is a nephew of the painter Amrita Sher-Gil, and some of her best canvases are on the walls of his home, as is his own luminous portrait of Amrita and her family.

"So, do things feel different?" Vivan asks, and I say, Not as much as I thought they would. People don't change, the heart of the place is the same. But of course there are the obvious changes. The B.J.P. in power. The new-technology boom that has given even more impetus and affluence to the Indian bourgeoisie.

Bill Clinton's visit to the subcontinent coincides with my own, and Geeta and Vivan portray the President's stay as a defining moment for the rich India that, since my last visit, has experienced exponential growth fuelled by new technology. In America, forty per cent of all Silicon Valley start-ups are launched by people of Indian origin, and in India itself the new electronic age has created many fortunes. Clinton made much of these new techno-boomers, and visited Hyderabad, one of the new boomtowns. For the Indian rich, his coming was both a validation and an apotheosis.

"You can't believe how they loved it," Geeta says. "So many people longing to bow down and say, Sir, Sir, we just love America."

"India and the U.S. as the two great democracies," Vivan adds. "India and America as partners and equals. That was the idea, and it was said without any sense of irony at all."

The India that remains in thrall to religious-communalist sectarians of the most extreme and medievalist type; the India that's fighting something like a civil war in Kashmir; the India that cannot feed or educate or give proper medical care to its people; the India that can't provide its citizens with drinkable water; the India in which the absence of simple toilet facilities obliges millions of women to control their natural functions so that they can relieve themselves under cover of darkness—these Indias were not paraded before the President of the United States. Gung-ho nuclear India, fat-cat entrepreneurial India, super-nerd computer India, glam-rock high-life India all pirouetted and twirled in the international media spotlight that accompanies the Leader of the Free World wherever he goes.

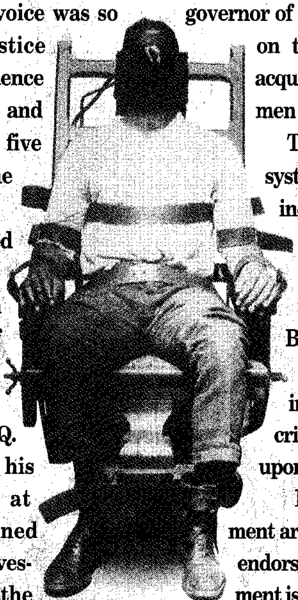
Monday, April 10th: I learn that the head of the British Council in India, Colin Perchard, will not let me use the council's auditorium for a press conference at the end of the week. In addition, I was told that the British High Commissioner, Sir Rob Young, was instructed by the Foreign Office to

THANKS TO MODERN SCIENCE

17 INNOCENT PEOPLE HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM DEATH ROW.

THANKS TO MODERN POLITICS

23 INNOCENT PEOPLE HAVE BEEN REMOVED FROM THE LIVING.



On April 15, 1999, Ronald Keith Williamson walked away from Oklahoma State Prison a free man. An innocent man. He had spent the last eleven years behind bars. "I did not rape or kill Debra Sue Carter," he would shout day and night from his death row cell. His voice was so torn and raspy from his pleas for justice that he could barely speak. DNA evidence would eventually end his nightmare and prove his innocence. He came within five days of being put to death for a crime he did not commit.

Williamson's plight is not an isolated one. Nor is it even unusual.

Anthony Porter also came within days of being executed. The state of Illinois halted his execution as it questioned whether or not Porter was mentally competent. Porter has an I.Q. of fifty-one. As the state questioned his competence, a journalism class at Northwestern University questioned his guilt. With a small amount of investigating, they managed to produce the real killer. After sixteen years on death row, Anthony Porter would find his freedom. He was lucky. He escaped with his life. A fate not shared by twenty-three other innocent men.

The Chicago Tribune, in its five-part series "Death Row justice derailed," pronounced, "Capital punishment in Illinois is a system so riddled with faulty evidence, unscrupulous trial tactics, and legal incompetence that justice has been forsaken." The governor of Illinois recently declared a moratorium on the death penalty after the state had acquired the dubious honor of releasing more men from death row than it had executed.

The unfairness that plagues the Illinois system also plagues every other state as well: incompetent lawyers, racial bias, and lack of access to DNA testing all inevitably lead to gross miscarriages of justice. As Supreme Court Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., stated, "Perhaps the bleakest fact of all is that the death penalty is imposed not only in a freakish and discriminatory manner, but also in some cases upon defendants who are actually innocent."

Even those who support capital punishment are finding it increasingly more difficult to endorse it in its current form. Capital punishment is a system that is deeply flawed – a system that preys on the poor and executes the innocent. It is a system that is fundamentally unjust and unfair. Please support our efforts to have a moratorium on further executions declared now. Support the ACLU.

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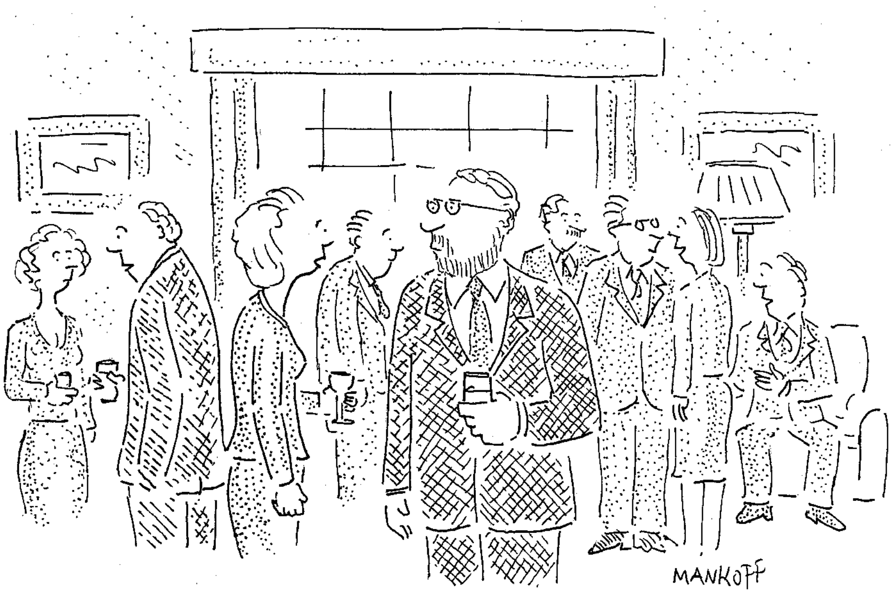
stay away from me—"not to come out of the stables." Robin Cook, the British Foreign Secretary, is arriving in India the day I am due to leave and, it would appear, is anxious not to be too closely associated with me. He is scheduled to travel to Iran soon, and, naturally, that trip must not be compromised.

Hansie Cronje, the captain of the South African cricket team and poster boy for the new South Africa, is being accused by the Indian police of having been involved, along with three of his teammates, in taking money from two Indian bookies to fix the results of one-day international games. Sensational news. The police claim to have transcripts of telephone conversations which leave no room for doubt. There are hints of a link to underworld crime-syndicate bosses like the notorious Dawood Ibrahim. People start speculating about this being the tip of an enormous iceberg. It's no secret that as the one-day version of the game has become a big money-spinner, and as such matches have proliferated, the interest of Far Eastern betting syndicates and bookmakers with underworld links has grown. But no cricket lover wants to believe that his heroes are jerks. Such chosen blindness is a form of corruption, too. "We treated them like gods," a fan says, "and they turned out to be crooks."

Within moments, the denials begin. Hansie is a gent, clean as a whistle, honest as the day is long. And why were Indian policemen bugging South African players' phones in the first place? And the voices on the tapes don't even sound South African. Cronje himself gives a press conference denying the charges, insisting that his teammates and his bank statements will confirm that he never tried to throw a match or received any cash for doing so. And behind all the backlash is what sounds, to Indian ears, suspiciously like racism. Commentators from the white cricket-playing countries have been the fastest out of the blocks, rubbishing the allegations, casting doubt on the professionalism and even the integrity of the Indian policemen investigating the case.

The officer in charge of my protection team is the kindly natured Akshey Kumar, who loves literature, can speak with knowledge about the work of Vikram Seth and Vikram Chandra, Rohinton Mistry and Arundhati Roy, and is proud of having two daughters at college in Boston, at Tufts. Kumar's friend K. K. Paul, New Delhi's Joint Commissioner of Police, is running the Cronje investigation. He is a superb detective, says Kumar, and a man of great probity. What's more, South Africa being a friendly nation, the Indian authorities would never allow these accusations to be made public unless they're one hundred and ten per cent convinced of the strength of the case that K. K. Paul and his team have built. Therefore, Kumar advises with great prescience, just wait and see.



"I'm confused now. Was Shakespeare somebody else or was somebody else Shakespeare?"

We're off on a road trip to show the boy the sights: Jaipur, Fatehpur Sikri, Agra. For me, the road itself has always been the main attraction. There are more trucks than I remembered, many more, blaring and lethal, often driving straight at us down the wrong side of the carriageway. There are wrecks from head-on smashes every few miles.

Look, Zafar, that is the shrine of a prominent Muslim saint; all the truckers stop there and pray for luck, even the Hindus. Then they get back into their cabs and take hideous risks with their lives, and ours as well. Look, Zafar, that is a tractor-trolley loaded with men. At election time, the *sarpanch*, or headman, of every village is ordered to provide such trolleyloads for politicians' rallies. Allegedly, for Sonia Gandhi ten tractor-trolleys per village is the requirement. Nobody would actually go to the rallies of their own free will. Look, those are the polluting chimneys of brick kilns smoking in the fields. Outside the city, the air is less filthy, but it still isn't clean. But in Bombay between December and February, think of this, aircraft often can't land or take off before 11 A.M. because of the smog.

The New Age is here, all right. Zafar, if you could read Hindi you'd see the New Age's new words being phonetically transliterated into that language's Devanagari script: Millennium tires. Oasis Cellular. Modern's Chinese "Fastfood."

Behold, Zafar, the incomprehensible acronyms and abbreviations. What is a G.I.S.? What is the H.S.I.D.C.? One reveals a genuine shift. You see it every hundred yards or so: S.T.D./I.S.D. P.C.O. P.C.O. is Public Call Office, and now anyone can pop into one of these little booths, make calls to anywhere in India or, indeed, the world, and pay on the way out. This is the genuine communications revolution of India.

Zafar wants to learn Hindi and Urdu, and come back without all the paraphernalia that presently surrounds us: without, to be blunt, me. Good. He's

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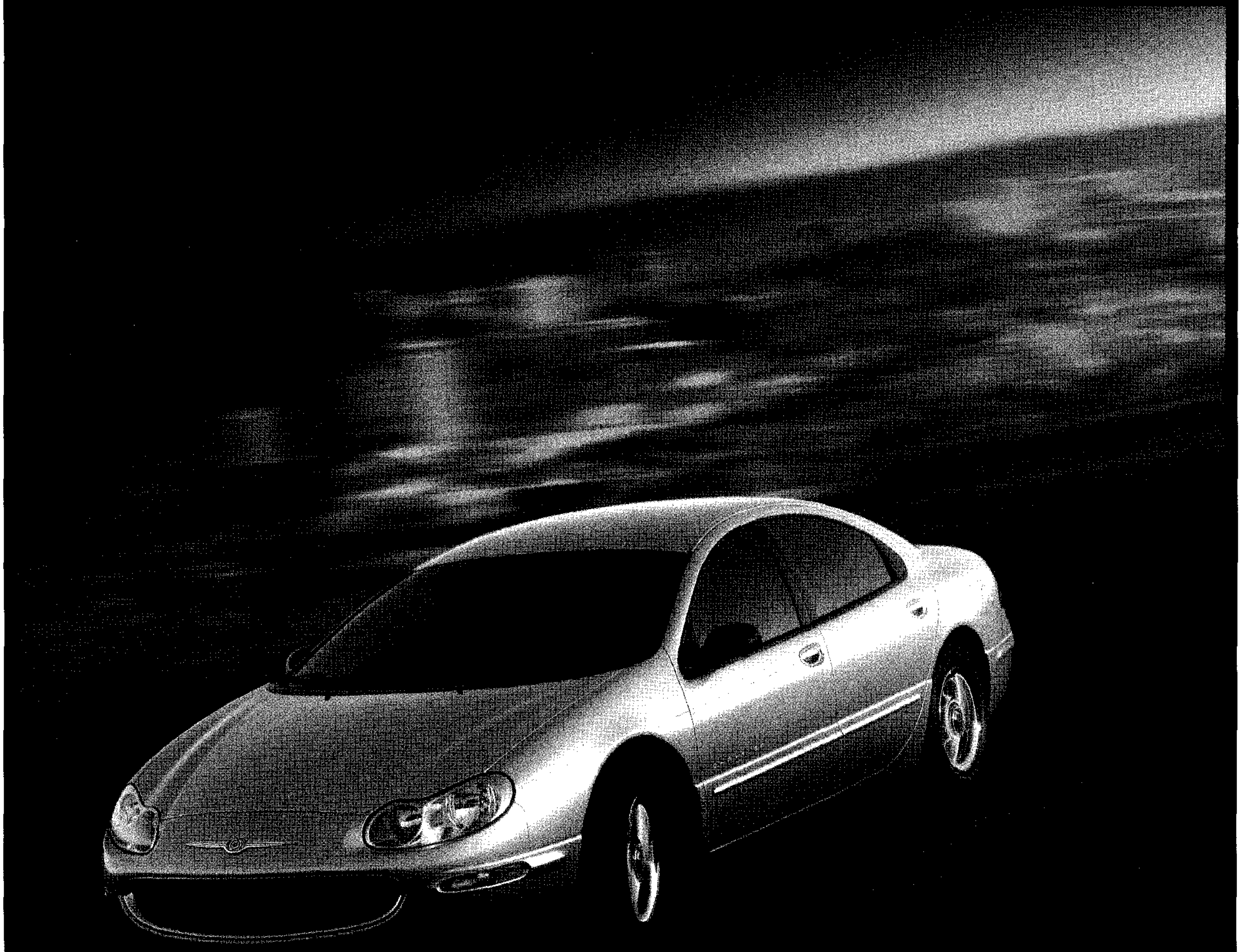

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got the bug. Once India bites you, you'll never be cured.

In the roadside *dhabas* where we stop for refreshments, they're talking about Hansie Cronje. Nobody is in any doubt that he is guilty as sin.

Bill Clinton visited the hilltop fortress-palace of Amber, outside Jaipur, but his security people wouldn't allow him to indulge in the famous local tourist treat. At the bottom of Amber's hill is a taxi rank of elephants. You buy a ticket at the Office of Elephant Booking and then lurch uphill on the back of your rented pachyderm. Where the President failed, Zafar and I succeed. I feel glad to know—in a moment of Schadenfreude—that somebody else's security was tighter and more restrictive than mine. Rajasthan is colorful. People wear colorful clothes and perform colorful dances and ride on colorful elephants to colorful ancient palaces, and these are things a President should know. He should also know that at a test site nearby, in Rajasthan's Thar Desert, Indian know-how has brought India into the nuclear age. Rajasthan is, therefore, the cradle of the new India that must be thought of as America's partner and equal. What was not drawn to Clinton's attention—because it has no place in either the colorful, touristic, elephant-taxi India or the new, thrusting, Internet-billionaire, entrepreneurial India that is currently being sold to the world—was that Rajasthan was dying of thirst, in the grip of one of the worst droughts for a century. Or that Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee's appeal to the people of India to help fight the massive destruction wrought by the drought by making charitable contributions, "no matter how small," was absurd while the Indian government is spending a fortune on Rajasthan's other weapon of mass destruction.

It's hot: almost a hundred and ten degrees. The rains have failed for the last two years, and it's two months to the next monsoon. Wells are running dry, and villagers are being forced to drink dirty water, which gives them diarrhea, which causes dehydration, and so the vicious circle tightens its grip. As the gulf widens between the feast of the haves and the famine of the have-nots, the stability of the country must be more and more at risk. I have been smelling a difference in the air, and, reluctant as I am to put into words what isn't much more than an instinct, I do feel a greater volatility in people, a crackle of anger just below the surface, a shorter fuse.

Tuesday, April 11th: At dinner last night, Zafar ate a bad shrimp. I blame myself. I should have known to remind him of the basic rules for travellers in India: always drink bottled water, make sure you see the seal on the bottle being broken in front of you, never eat salad (it won't have been washed in bottled water), never put ice in your drinks (it won't have been made with bottled water) . . . and never, never eat seafood unless you're by the sea. Zafar's desert shrimp knocked him flat. He has a sleepless night: vomiting, diarrhetic. This morning he looks terrible, and we have a long, hard journey ahead of us, on bumpy, difficult roads. Now he, too, needs to guard against dehydration. Unlike the villagers we're leaving behind, however, we have plenty of bottled water to drink, and proper medication. And, of course, we're leaving.

A day to grind through. Long, gruelling journey to Agra, then back to Delhi. Zafar suffers but remains stoical. He's too weak to walk around the magnificent Fatehpur Sikri site, and only just manages to drag himself around the Taj, which he declares to be smaller than expected. I am very relieved when I can finally get him into a comfortable hotel bed.

I turn on the television news. Cronje has confessed.

Wednesday, April 12th: "I AM A CROOK!: CRONJE" says the banner headline in the morning paper. The erstwhile cricketing demigod has admitted to having feet of clay: he has "been dishonest," he has taken money, and now he has been fired from the South African captaincy and kicked off the national team. K. K. Paul and his men have been thoroughly vindicated.

The money Cronje took was paltry, as it turns out: a mere eight thousand two hundred dollars. Not much for a man's good name. Hansie Cronje's locker-room nickname—given him long before the present scandal—was Crime. As in crime doesn't pay. (He was notoriously stingy, the story goes, about buying a round of drinks.) Now, as the South Af-

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From the author of
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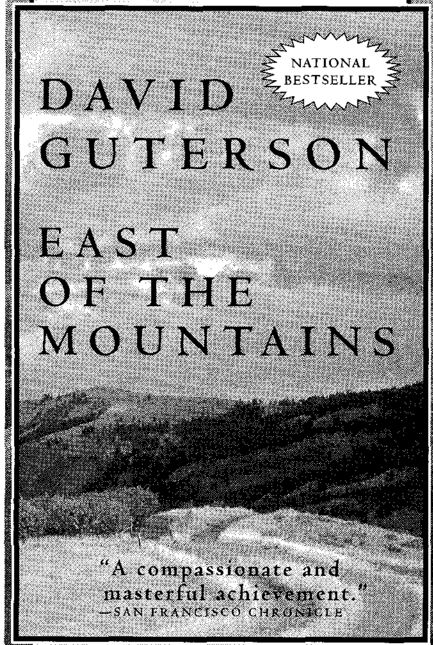

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rican government moves toward agreeing to his extradition to stand trial in India, and his lawyers warn him to expect a jail term, he must have started thinking of that nickname as a prophecy.

I am impressed by the relative lack of triumphalism in the Indian response to Cronje's downfall. "What are we gloating over?" warns Siddharth Saxena in the *Hindustan Times:* meaning, let's not be self-righteous about this. The bookmakers were Indians, after all, and in the revelations that should now begin to flood out we may learn that we're no angels, either. One of the bookies, Rajesh Kalra, is already under arrest, and a suspected middleman, the movie actor Kishan Kumar, will be arrested as soon as he gets out of the hospital, where he is being treated for a sudden heart problem.

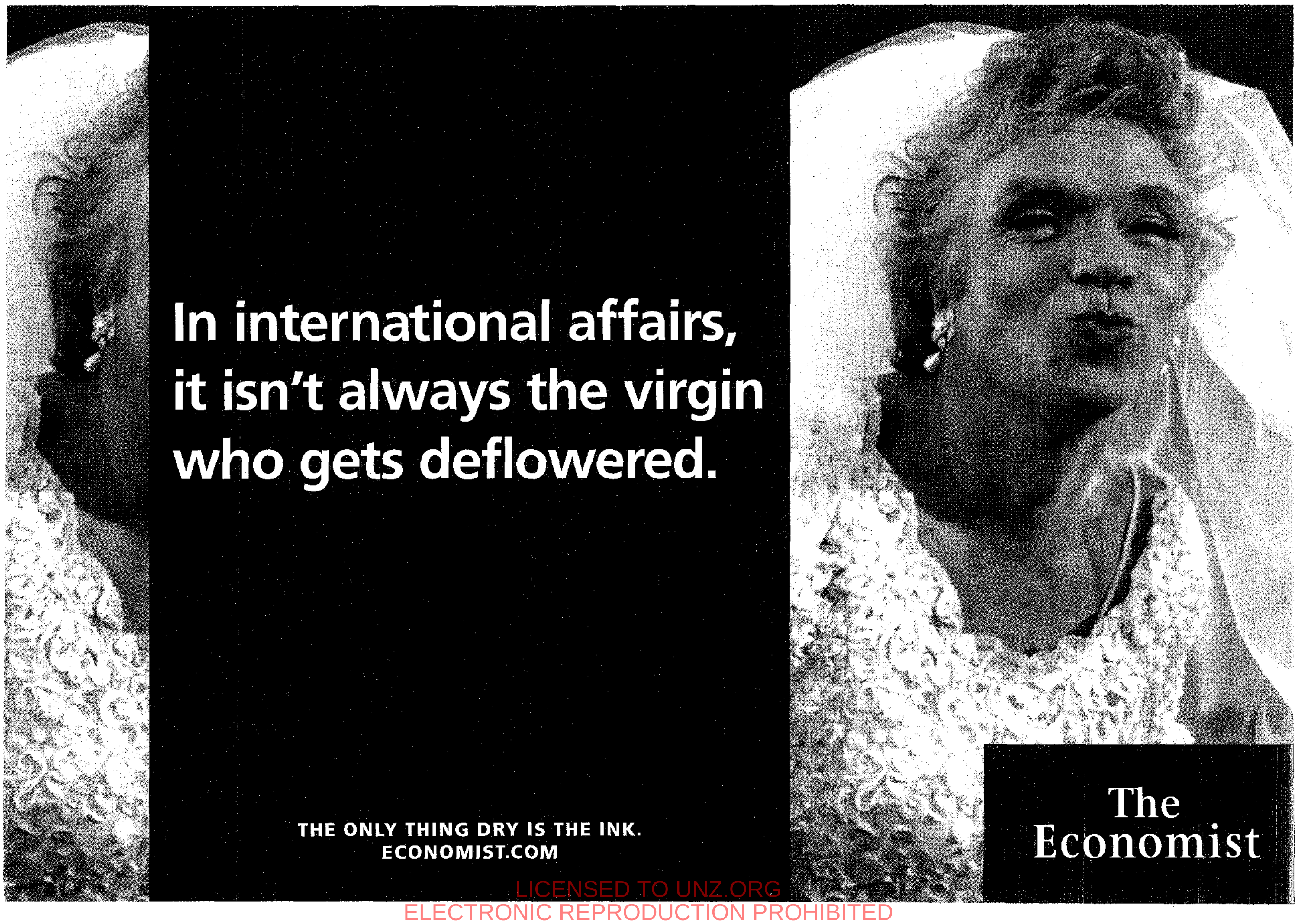
Sometime in the nineteen-twenties, my paternal grandfather, Mohammed Din Khaliqi, a successful Delhi businessman, bought a hot-season retreat for his family, a modest stone cottage in the pretty little town of Solan, in the Simla Hills. He named it Anis Villa, after his only son, Anis Ahmed. That son, my father, who later took the surname Rushdie, after the Arab philosopher Ibn Rushd (Averroës), gifted the house to me on my twenty-first birthday. And eleven years ago the state government of Himachal Pradesh took it over without so much as a by-your-leave.

It isn't easy to seize a man's property in India, even for a state government. In order to get hold of Anis Villa, the local authorities falsely declared it to be "evacuee property." The law pertaining to evacuee property was devised after Partition to enable the state to take possession of homes left behind by individuals and families who had gone to Pakistan. This law did not apply to me. I was an Indian citizen until I became a British one by naturalization, and I have never held a Pakistani passport or been a resident of that country. Anis Villa had been wrongfully seized, and provably so.

Vijay Shankardass and I became close friends because of Solan. He took on the Himachal authorities on my behalf. The case took seven years, and we won. Both parts of this sentence are impressive. Seven years, by Indian standards, is incredibly fast. And to defeat a government, even when right is quite clearly on your side, takes some doing.

We regained possession of the Solan villa in November, 1997. Since then, the roof has been fixed, the house cleaned and painted, and one bathroom modernized. The electricity, plumbing, and telephone all work. In preparation for our visit, furniture and furnishings have been rented for a week from a local store, at the surreal cost, for a six-bedroom house, of a hundred dollars. A caretaker and his family live on the premises. Solan has grown out of all recognition, but the villa's view of the hills remains clear and unspoiled.

Zafar is just a few weeks shy of his own twenty-first birthday. Going to Solan with him today closes a circle. It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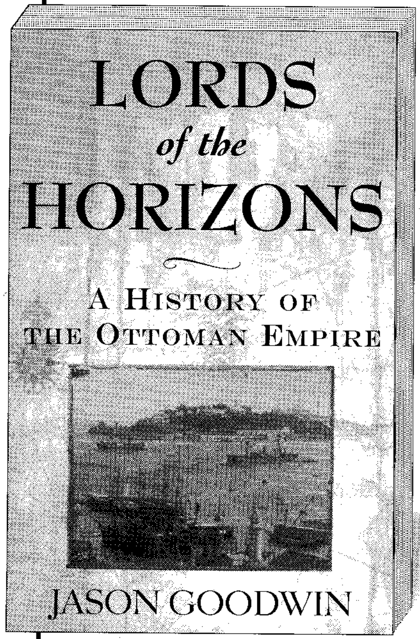

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also discharges a responsibility I have long felt to the memory of my father, who died in 1987. You see, Abba, I have reclaimed our house. Four generations of our family, living and dead, can now forgather there. One day, it will belong to Zafar and his little brother, Milan. In a family as uprooted and far-flung as ours, this little acre of continuity stands for a very great deal.

To get to Solan, you take a three-hour ride in an air-conditioned "chair car" on the Shatabdi Express from New Delhi to Le Corbusier's city of Chandigarh, the shared capital city of Punjab and Haryana. Then you drive for an hour and a half, up into the hills. At least, this is what you do if you're not me. The police do not want me to take the train. "Sir, exposure is too great." They are upset because someone at a hotel in Jaipur has blabbed to Reuters that I was there. Vijay has managed to squash the Reuters story for the moment, but the shield of invisibility is wearing thin. At Solan, as even the police accept, the cat will surely spring from the bag. It's where everyone expects me to go. The day before yesterday, the Indian state TV service Doordarshan sent a team up to Anis Villa to nose around and quiz Govind Ram, the caretaker, who stonewalled nobly. Once I'm actually there, however, the story will surely break.

One rather unattractive development: the police high-ups who telephone Akshey Kumar every five minutes to ask how things are going have developed the notion that the Jaipur leak was engineered by Vijay and myself. This germ of suspicion will shortly blossom into a full-blown disease. Zafar is feeling better, but I refuse to inflict what will be a seven-hour car journey on him. I put him on the train, lucky dog. I am to meet him at Chandigarh station with my inconspicuous "car-cade" of four black sedans.

There's another train leaving Delhi, the one that links the Indian capital and the city of Lahore, in Pakistan. However, I discover that the service is now at risk. Pakistan complains that India isn't providing its share of the rolling stock. India complains, rather more seriously, that Pakistan is using the train to smuggle drugs and counterfeit money into India.

Drugs are a huge issue, of course, but the counterfeit-money issue is also a big one. In Nepal these days, people are reluctant to accept Indian five-hundred-rupee notes, because of the quantity of forgeries in circulation. Not long ago, a diplomat from the Pakistan High Commission in Delhi went to pay his young son's school fees, and used a mixture of genuine and funny money to do so. The boy was expelled, and although he was later reinstated, the link between the Pakistani government and the bad money had been clearly established.

I collect Zafar at Chandigarh, and as we go up into the hills my heart lifts. Mountains have a way of cheering up plains dwellers. The air freshens, tall conifers lean from steep slopes. As the sun sets, the lights of the first hill stations glow in the twilight above us. We pass a narrow-gauge railway train on its slow, picturesque way up to Shimla. For me this is the emotional high point of the trip, and I can see that Zafar, too, is moved. We stop at a *dhaba* near Solan for dinner, and the owner tells me how happy he is that I'm there, and someone runs up for an autograph. I ignore the worried expression on Akshey Kumar's face. Even though I've hardly ever been here in my life, and not at all since I was twelve years old, I feel that I'm home.

It's dark when we reach the villa. From the road, we have to climb down a hundred and twenty-two steps to get to it. At the bottom, there's a little gate, and Vijay, also in a state of high feeling, formally welcomes me to the home he has won back for my family. The caretaker runs up and astonishes Zafar by stooping down to touch our feet. I am not a superstitious man, but I feel the presence at my shoulder of my grandfather, who died before I was born, and of my parents' younger selves. The sky is on fire with stars. I go into the back garden by myself. I need to be alone.

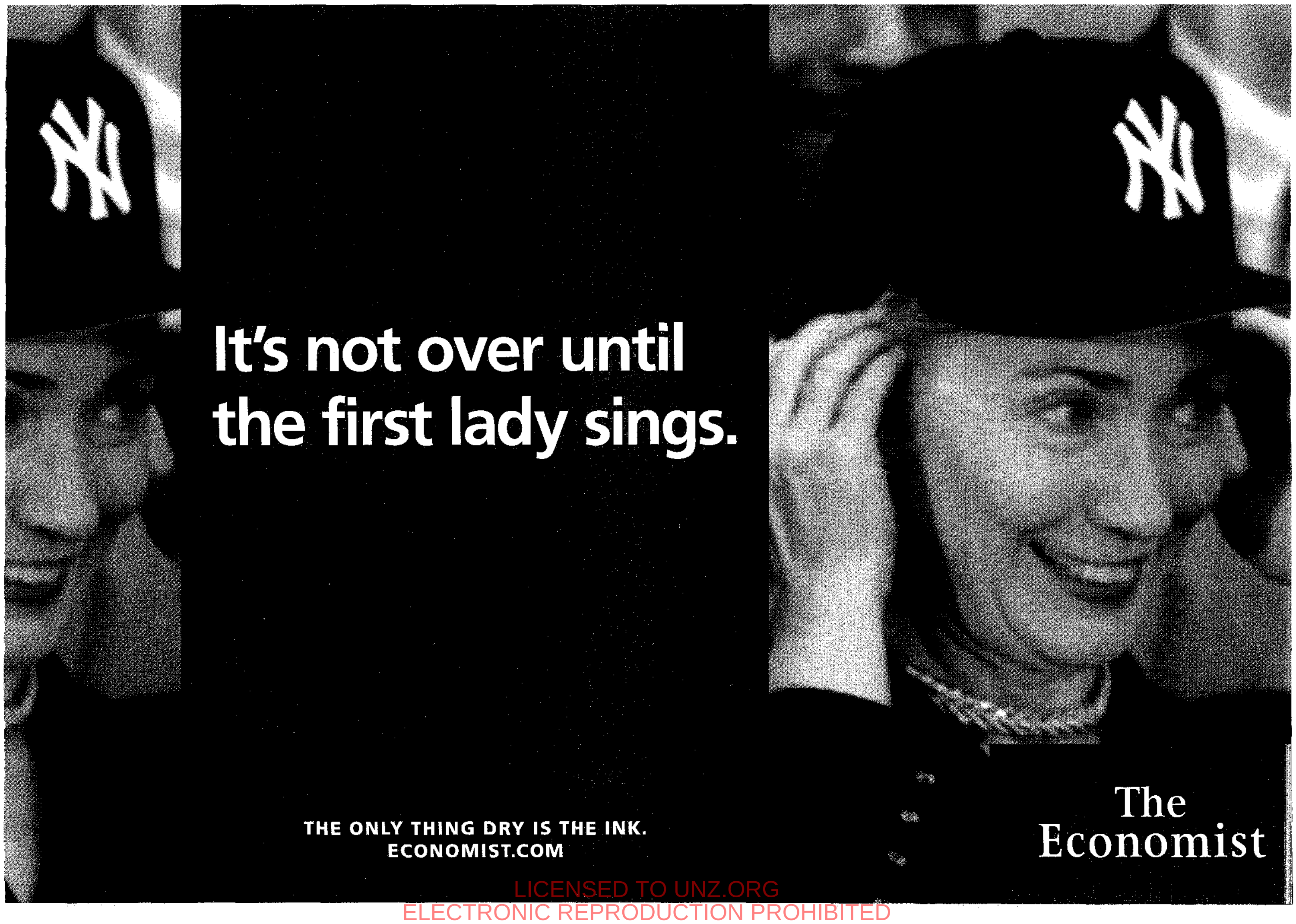
Thursday, April 13th: I am woken at 5 A.M. by amplified music and chanting from a mandira, a Hindu temple, across the valley. I get dressed and walk around the house in the dawn light. With high-pitched pink roofs and little corner turrets, the house is more beautiful than I remembered, more beautiful than it looked in Vijay's photographs of it, and the view is as stunning as promised. It's a very strange feeling to walk around a house you don't know that somehow belongs to you. It takes a while for us to grow into one another, the house and me, but by the time the others wake up it's mine. We spend most of the day mooching around the premises, sitting in the garden under the shade of big old conifers, eating Vijay's special scrambled eggs. I know now that the trip has been worthwhile: I know it from the expression on Zafar's face.

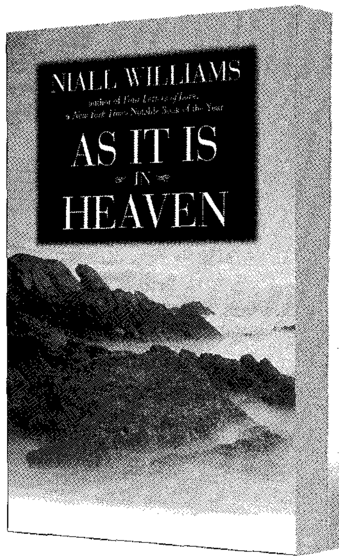
In the afternoon, we make an excursion to the next town, the former British summer capital. They called it Simla, but it's gone back to being Shimla. Vijay shows me the law courts where he fought for Anis Villa, and we go, too, to the former Viceregal Lodge, a big old pile that once staged the crucial pre-Independence Simla Conference of 1945 and now houses a research establishment called the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies.

Zafar walks gravely around the conference table where the shades of Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah are seated, but when we get outside again he asks, "Why is that stone lion still holding up an English flag?" The probable answer, I hypothesize, is that nobody noticed until he did. India has been independent for over half a century, but the flag of St. George is still up there on the roof.

The Institute of Advanced Studies is run by a local B.J.P. wallah, and I do a little ducking and swerving to dodge him in the grounds. Alas, I mustn't fall into the trap of looking like the B.J.P.'s man. A handshake that would certainly be photographed is worth a little fancy footwork to avoid. Unlike V. S. Naipaul (who is also in India, I gather), I do not see the rise of Hindu nationalism as a great outpouring of India's creative spirit. I see it as the negation of the India I grew up in, as the triumph of sectarianism over secularism, of hatred over fellowship, of ugliness over love. It is true that Prime Minister Vajpayee has tried to lead his party in a more moderate direction, and that Vajpayee himself is surprisingly popular among Muslims, but his attempt to reshape his party in his own image has failed. The B.J.P. is the political manifestation of the extremist Hindu movement the R.S.S. (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh), rather as Sinn Fein, in Northern Ireland, is the political offspring of the Provisional I.R.A. In order to change the B.J.P., Vajpayee would have to carry the leadership of the R.S.S. with him. Regrettably, the opposite is happening. The relatively moderate R.S.S. chief, Professor Rajendra Singh, has been ousted by a hard-liner, who has started warning Vajpayee to toe the R.S.S. line.

The Prime Minister's options are limited. He could give in and unleash the dogs of religious strife. He could try doing what Indira Gandhi brilliantly carried off in 1969, when the kingmakers of the Congress tried to turn her into their puppet. (She was expelled from her own party, formed her own faction in the

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Congress, rallied M.P.s to her side, and later called a general election and destroyed the Old Guard at the polls.) Or, as seems most likely, he could soldier on until the next election and then stand down. At that point, the B.J.P.'s moderate mask will slip, the Party will no longer be able to hold together the kind of broad-based coalition of the sort that presently underpins its power, and, given the shambles that the Congress Party is in, India will enter another phase of splintered, unstable governments. It's not a happy prediction, but it's what the probabilities suggest. And it's a good enough reason for keeping away from B.J.P. apparatchiks, however low-level they may be.

My metamorphosis from observer to observed, from the Salman I know to the "Rushdie" I often barely recognize, continues apace. Rumors of my presence in India are everywhere. I am profoundly depressed to hear that a couple of Islamic organizations have vowed to make trouble, and trouble is news, and so maybe, I think, this will be seen as the meaning of my trip to India, which will be very, very sad, and bad indeed.

At dinner in Solan's Himani restaurant, I'm tucking into the spicy Indian version of Chinese food when I'm approached by a TV reporter called Agnihotri, who happens to be vacationing up here with his family. And there it is: he has his scoop and the story's out. Within moments, a local press reporter arrives and asks me a few friendly questions. None of this is very unexpected, but as a result of these chance encounters the jitteriness of the police escalates into a full-scale row.

Back at Anis Villa, Vijay receives a call on his cell phone from a police officer named Kulbir Krishan, in Delhi. Krishan is somewhere in the middle of the invisible chain of command of Delhi desk pilots, but what he says makes Vijay lose his composure for the first time in all the years of our friendship. He is almost trembling as he tells me, "We are accused of having called those journalists to the restaurant. This man says we have not been gentlemen, we have not kept our word, and we have, if you can believe the phrase, 'talked out of turn.' Finally the fellow says, 'There will be riots in Delhi tomorrow, and if we fire on the crowds and there are deaths, the blood will be on your heads.' "

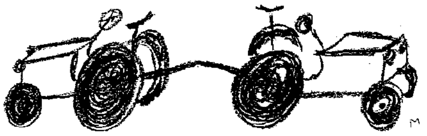
I am horrified. It quickly becomes clear to me that there are two issues here. The first, and lesser, issue is that after a week of accepting all manner of limitations and security conditions we are being accused of dishonesty and bad faith. That is insulting and unjust, but it isn't, finally, dangerous. The second issue is a matter of life and death. If the Delhi police have become so trigger-happy that they are preparing to kill people, then they must be stopped before it's too late. No time now for niceties.

Zafar looks on, dazed, while I blow my stack at poor, decent Akshey Kumar (who is not at all to blame) and tell him that unless Kulbir Krishan gets back on the phone right now, apologizes to Vijay and me personally, and assures me that there are no plans to murder anybody tomorrow, I will insist on our driving through the night back to New Delhi so that I can be waiting at Prime Minister Vajpayee's office door at dawn, to ask him to deal with the problem personally.

After a certain amount of this kind of raging—"I'll go to the British High Commissioner! I'll call a press conference! I'll write a newspaper article!"—the hapless Kulbir does call back to speak of "misunderstandings," and promises that there will be no shootings or deaths.

"If I spoke out of context," he memorably concludes, "then I am very sorry indeed." I burst out laughing at the sheer absurdity of this formulation and put down the phone. But I do not sleep well. The meaning of this entire journey will be defined by what happens in the next two days, and even though I believe that the police are overreacting, I can't be sure. Delhi is their town, and me, I'm Rip van Winkle.

Friday, April 14th: We leave Solan at dawn and drive Zafar and Vijay to Chandigarh station. (I am going all the way by road.) Zafar is recovering from the shrimp attack, but Vijay looks worn out, frazzled. He repeats several times that he has never been spoken to so



8 items Robinson Crusoe wished he had–

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toothpaste
mate
soap
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rudely, and doesn't propose to let the matter rest. I can see that he's had it with the police, with all the travelling, and probably with me. Tomorrow night, I tell him, all this will be over and you can go back to being a lawyer and not think about Salman Rushdie and his problems anymore. He laughs weakly and gets on the train. I am travelling to Delhi at the invitation of the organizers of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, and today is their banquet. But I'm not thinking about the prize. All the way back to Delhi, I'm wondering whose instincts will prove the sharper: mine or my protectors'. How will my return-of-the-native trip end: happily or badly? I'll soon know.

At half past twelve I'm closeted in a meeting with R. S. Gupta, the special commissioner in charge of security for the whole city of Delhi. He is a calm, forceful man, used to getting his way. He paints a dark picture. A Muslim politician, Shoaib Iqbal, plans to go to Friday midday prayers at the city's most important mosque, the Jama Masjid, in Old Delhi, and there get support for a demonstration against me, and against the Indian government for allowing me to enter the country. The congregation will be in five figures, and if the mosque's imam—it's Bukhari—supports the call to demonstrate, the numbers could be huge and bring the city to a standstill. "We are negotiating with them," Gupta says, "to keep the numbers small and the event peaceful. Maybe we will succeed."

After a couple of hours of high-tension waiting, during which I am effectively confined to quarters—"Sir, no movements, please"—the news is good. Only about two hundred people have marched (and two hundred marchers, in India, is a number smaller than zero), and it has all gone off without a hitch. "Fortunately," Mr. Gupta tells me, "we have been able to manage it."

What really happened in Delhi today? It is one of the characteristics of security forces everywhere in the world to try to have it both ways. Had there been mass demonstrations, they would have said, "You see, all our nervousness has been amply justified." But there were no such marches, and so I'm told, "We were able to prevent the trouble because of our foresight and skill." Maybe so. But it might also be that for the vast majority of Indian Muslims the controversy over "The Satanic Verses" is old hat now, and in spite of the efforts of the politician and the imam (both of whom made blood-and-thunder speeches) nobody could really be bothered to march. Oh, there's a novelist in town to go to a dinner? What's his name? Rushdie? So what?

It's a hot day in Delhi, and there's a hot wind blowing. A dust storm rages across the city. As we all take in the news that the only storm today is meteorologically induced, we can finally begin to relax. The script in people's heads is being rewritten. The foretold ending has not come to pass. What happens instead is extraordinary, and, for Zafar and me, an event of immense emotional impact, far exceeding in its force even the tumultuous reception of "Midnight's Children," almost twenty years ago. What bursts out is not violence but joy.

At a quarter to eight in the evening, Zafar and I walk into the Commonwealth Prize reception at the Oberoi Hotel, and from that moment until we leave India the celebrations never stop. Journalists and photographers surround us, their faces wreathed in most unjournalistic smiles. Friends burst through the media wall to embrace us. The actor Roshan Seth, recently recovered from serious heart problems, hugs me and says, "Look at us, yaar, we're both supposed to be dead but still going strong." The eminent columnist Amita Malik, a friend of my family's from the old days in Bombay, quickly gets over her embarrassment at mistaking Zafar for my bodyguard and reminisces wonderfully about the past, praising my father's wit, his quick gift for repartee, and telling tales of my favorite uncle, Hameed, who died too young, too long ago. One of the great English-language Indian novelists, Nayantara Sahgal, clasps my hands and whispers, "Welcome home." I look around and there's Zafar being interviewed for television and speaking fluently and touchingly about his own happiness at being here. My heart overflows.

Saturday, April 15th: In all my conversations with the press, I've tried to avoid reopening old wounds, to tell Indian Muslims that I am not and have never been their enemy, and to stress that I'm in India to mend broken links and to begin, so to speak, a new chapter. Now the media agrees. "Let's turn a page," the *Asian Age* says. Dileep Padgaonkar, of the *Times of India*, will put it more movingly the day after I leave: "He is reconciled with India, and India with him. . . . Something sublime has happened to him which should enable him to continue to mesmerise us with his yarns. He has returned to where his heart has always been. He has returned home." In the *Hindustan Times*, there is an editorial headed "RECONSIDER THE BAN." This sentiment is echoed right across the media. The *Times of India* finds an Islamic scholar, as well as other intellectuals, supporting an end to the ban. On the electronic media, opinion polls run seventy-five per cent in favor of allowing "The Satanic Verses" to be freely published in India at long last.

Vijay throws a farewell party for me. And there's a surprise: my two actress aunts, Uzra Butt and her sister Zohra Segal, are there, with my cousin Kiran Segal, Zohra's daughter and one of the country's foremost teachers of the Odissi school of Indian classical dancing. This is the zany wing of the family, sharp of tongue and mischievous of eye. Uzra and Zohra are the grand old ladies of the Indian theatre, and we were all in love with Kiran at one time or another. Kiran lived with her mother in an apartment in Hampstead for a time in the nineteen-sixties, and when I was at boarding school at Rugby I sometimes spent vacations in their spare bedroom, next to Kiran's bedroom door, on which there was a large, admonitory skull-and-crossbones sign. I now discover that Vijay and Roshan Seth stayed in the same spare room in the same period. All three of us would look wistfully at the skull and crossbones, and none of us ever got past it.

"I haven't seen you dance for years," I say to Kiran.

"Come back soon," she says. "Then I'll dance." ♦

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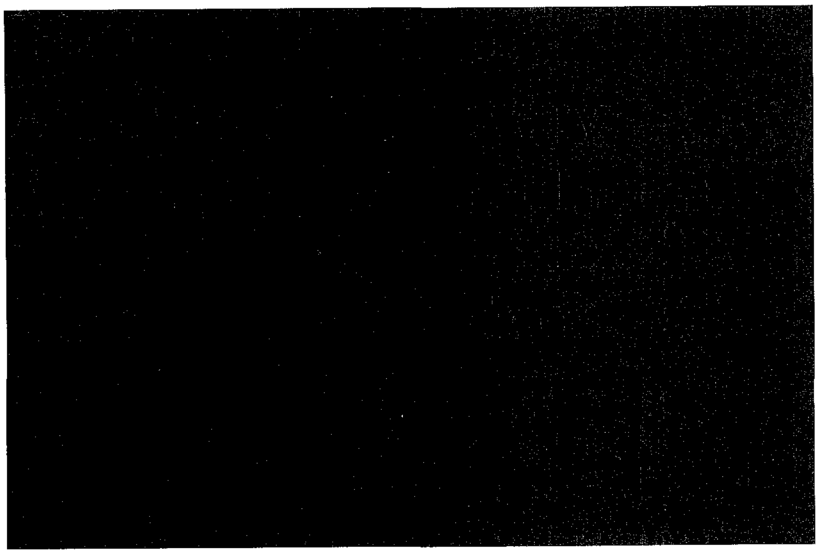

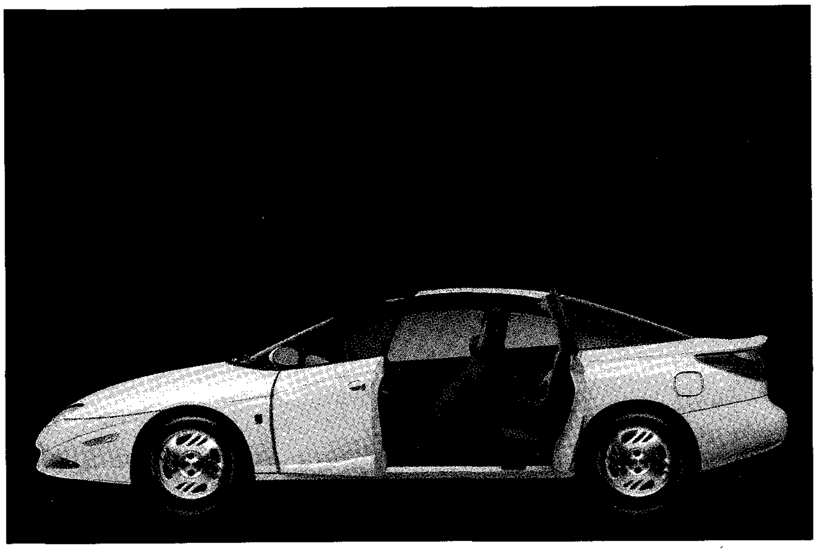

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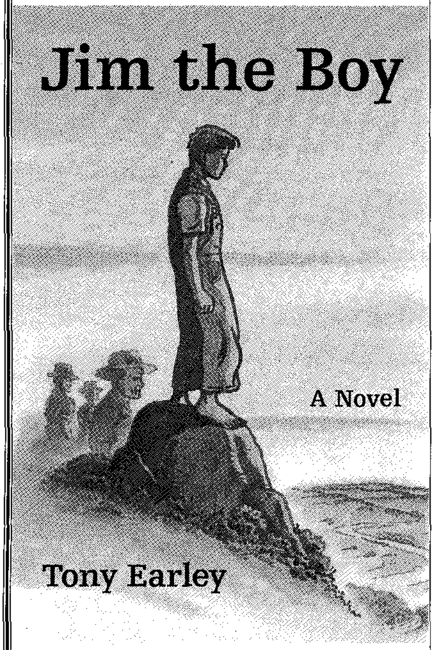

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THE PASSENGER

BY MARISA SILVER

I have a ring in my nose and a ring in my navel, and people make assumptions about me. None of them are true. I'm not a punk or a slave, a biker chick or a fashion hag.

I drive a limo. I take people where they want to go—to parties and airports, to score drugs at a ranch house or a piece of ass at a hotel bar. On any given night, I'll be taking the curves on Mulholland, hitting a prom in Northridge, or, if I'm lucky, flying the straight shot out the highway to Malibu. People think Los Angeles is the same everywhere—all palm trees and swimming pools. But some nights you need a passport and a two-way dictionary just to get from Hancock Park to Koreatown.

Ruthanne's my dispatcher. I've never met her, but she's probably the person I talk to most. Once I saw her red jacket hanging off a chair at the office. It had a dog appliquéd across the back. Normally, someone who wore that kind of jacket would have nothing to say to me, and so, in a sense, not meeting has brought us closer. Right now, her voice crackles over my car radio.

"Ex-Lax," she says, using her helium-balloon voice. "Who wants to shit or get off the pot?"

"Ex-Lax" is her shorthand for a pickup at Lax, the airport. She says "Re-lax" when you have to make a second airport trip. Ha, ha, ha, right? But I'm smiling.

I pick up my handset. "Twenty-two. I'm all over it." We're required to use our call number, but Ruthie never does. She calls me by my name, Babe.

"O.K., Babe," she says. "You're picking up two Chins outside International baggage."

"No way."

"Yes way," she says. "You'll have to circle the drain."

I click off. The usual airport routine is that I park the limo and wait at the arrivals gate, holding a piece of cardboard with a stranger's name on it. Finally, a passenger comes off the plane. He'll smile when he sees his name, delighted that he's the same guy he was before he took off. Sometimes he'll be so relieved that he'll shake my hand, like I care one way or another. It's moments like these that kill me.

But meeting someone outside baggage is an ordeal. Security is tight, and you can't wait by the curb for more than twenty seconds before some uniform appears, telling you to scram. So you have to drive around and around until you actually see the pickup.

I click on my radio again. "It could take an hour," I complain.

"You vant I should give it to someone else, *daah-link*?" Ruthie answers, doing her Gabor sisters impersonation.

"No," I say quickly. International is promising in other ways—people are often confused by the exchange rate. I once got a hundred-dollar tip from an Indian family that had fastened their suitcases together with electrical tape. I felt bad about taking it, but not so bad about having it.

I'm twenty-three. I live alone in a second-story box on Lincoln Boulevard. I had a boyfriend for a while. I liked him, then I didn't. It was like a sugar rush and just after. I have a few friends left over from high school, and we go drinking sometimes, but lately I'm not sure why. We get together and moan about rent, or we get worked up telling stories we've told before. Then we end up staring into our drinks because facing each other is like looking into a mirror in bad lighting.

A few years ago, my mother left L.A. to join a spiritual community in the desert. This makes it sound like she's living in a collection of gassy, glowing matter; in fact, it's a bunch of trailers on a scrubby piece of land near a Marine base.

After she left, I worked as a waitress, a copy-shop clerk, a messenger—all those jobs that you get when you have nothing but a couple of community-college credits in highly useless things like World Literature. The difference between me and the other employees was that I didn't want to be something else. With all the other people it was, "I work in a copy shop, but I really want to act." Or, "I sell subscriptions over the phone, but I have this great idea for an Internet company." Not that I want to drive a car for the rest of my life, but I'm willing to say that driving is what I do for now.

The fifth time I circle International baggage, people begin to pour out the doors. Most of the passengers wear wrinkled nylon track suits and baseball caps with American logos—walking advertisements for a place they're seeing for the first time. They look dazed. All but a few are Asian, and I have no idea how I'm going to find my fare. Then I see a man and a woman standing at the curb with a very large black suitcase between them, and for some reason I know that they are my Chins. She's wearing a neatly cut jacket and a matching skirt. Her black heels are so polished they reflect the lights overhead. He wears a double-breasted suit that hangs loosely over his thin body. His hair is swooped back into a gentle pompadour, and it's shiny with whatever goop he put into it. You'd never guess that these two had just spent the day on an airplane.

"Mr. and Mrs. Chin?" I call out the passenger-side window.

They don't respond for a moment, but then they nod enthusiastically. I pop the trunk and hop out of the car. I reach for their suitcase, but Mr. Chin waves me away and points toward the back seat.

"It's safer to put it in the trunk," I explain. "If the car stops suddenly, the case could fly into your face."

The Chins smile, as if I've said something amusing but not exactly funny, and I realize that they don't understand a word I'm saying. I go for the suitcase again, but Mr. Chin steps in front of me, shaking his head. Mrs. Chin slides into the back seat like a swan, her legs pressed together, and holds out her hands to take the suitcase, which Mr. Chin pushes inside. Finally, he tucks himself neatly into the space left over and waits for me to shut the door. I think for a minute about pressing the point: it's company policy to put luggage in the trunk. If the Chins got hit with that hard plastic bag, they could sue and I'd be out of a job in the blink of an eye. But I let it go. People do things a million different ways. It's when you interfere that guns are drawn.

I get into the driver's seat, and Mr. Chin hands me a piece of paper through the privacy window. They want to go to Tarzana. I'm surprised. I would have thought they were visiting relatives in Monterey Park or staying in one of the downtown hotels. I call my destination in to Ruthanne.

"Tarzana," she repeats after me, and gives her trademark jungle yodel.

I start the car and head toward the 405. It's still early and I have eight hours of road ahead.

The first time my mother tried to off herself, I was nineteen, already living on my own, working shifts at an industrial-laundry center on Highland. So she called to tell me.

Marisa Silver with her dog, Wyatt, at home in Los Angeles. Photograph by Andrea Artz.

"Babe," she said. "I'm leaving now."

"You're calling to tell me you're leaving the house?"

"I'm leaving," she said. "In the final sense of the word."

"Delia," I said, the way I did when I wanted to get her attention, "what the hell are you talking about?"

She said she'd taken an entire bottle of Xanax. She was getting yawny and slurry as we were talking, and I couldn't get her to tell me how many pills had been in the bottle. But, since she usu-

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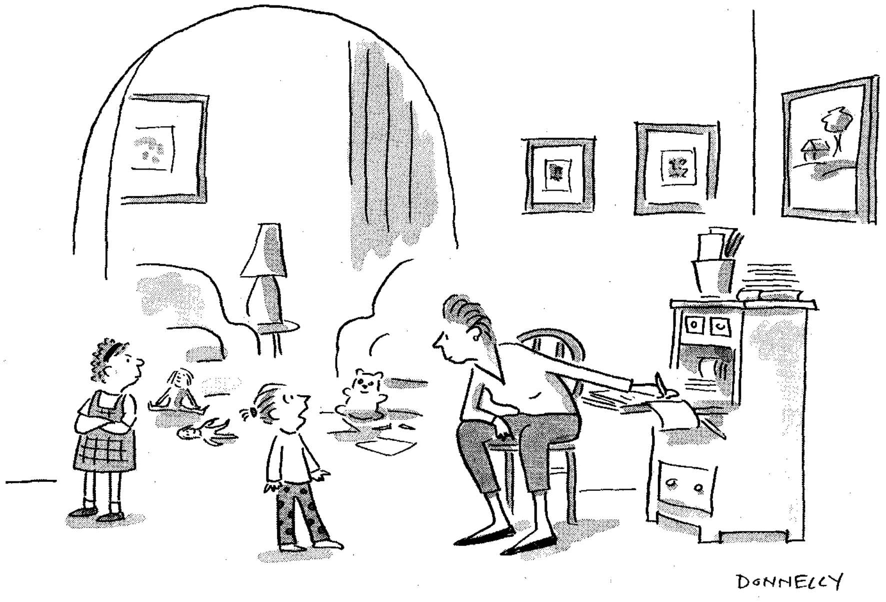

"Mommy, Becky says she's not going to put me in her memoirs!"

• •

ally avoided taking her pills when she needed them, I figured that "entire" might be the truth.

"Don't move," I said. "Don't do anything."

When I got to her shabby rental in Laurel Canyon, she was sitting on the couch with her legs crossed underneath her. Her orange dress, missing half its sequinned flowers, covered her knees like a tent. Bubbles of spit shone on her chin, and there was vomit on the dress.

"Babe!" she said, as if I were dropping in for a surprise visit.

"How many did you take?" I asked. The bottle of pills was on the coffee table.

"Just a couple," she said. "I started to gag and then everything just came up and out." She giggled and covered her mouth like a girl on a date. "Want some tea? Or I could make us some lunch?"

"I have to go back to work," I said. "They'll dock my pay."

"O.K.," she said, pouting. She played with the sequins on her dress. "I'm fine, I guess."

"I'll come back later," I said. "I'll bring you dinner."

"That would be nice." Her voice was drifting away, like some balloon a kid had let go of. She closed her eyes. "How's the laundry, Babe?"

"How?"

"Yeah. What's it like?"

"It's like dirty sheets getting clean."

"Um," she said. She smiled and nodded as though she were remembering some favorite childhood dessert. Her long hair had begun to make her look older, and I could see age spots on her chest.

I went to work, where I unloaded soggy restaurant tablecloths and hospital sheets from the washing machines and crammed them into the carriers strung from the ceiling. After eight hours, my apron was soaked and my hands were waterlogged, and I was a little high off the dryer fumes. When I walked out onto Highland, I had the feeling I was swimming. The noise of the traffic was like the rubbery sounds you hear underwater.

Later that night, I brought bad Mexican take-out up to my mother. She was asleep in her bed. Her forehead was sweaty and cool. I watched her breathe a few times, then turned on the TV so she would have some company when she woke up. I put the food in the refrigerator with a note reminding her to take the burrito out of the Styrofoam container before she reheated it.

Mr. Chin has something stuck in his teeth. He's working at it, first with his forefinger, then with the nail of his upside-down pinkie. Finally, he gives up, runs his tongue across his teeth, stares out the window. The traffic

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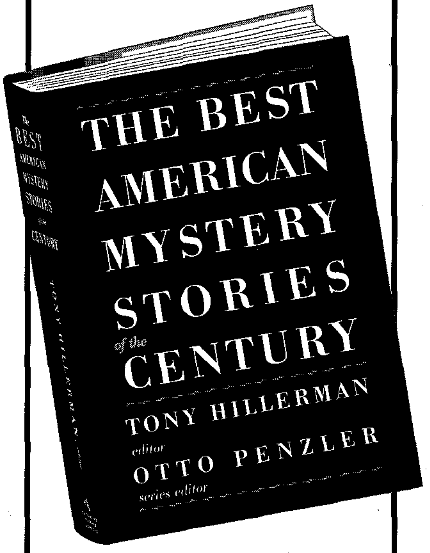
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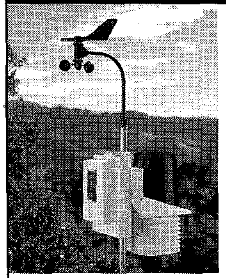

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is starting to get a little thick for my taste, and the radio crackles on: Ruthanne, announcing a pickup in Sherman Oaks at eight-thirty.

I reach for my handset. "Twenty-two. I'll take it."

"Goody," she says. "Recording studio. Could be a *gen-u-ine* rock star."

"Goody," I shoot back. "I'll make sure he doesn't pee in the ashtray."

I cut across two lanes and exit the freeway at Sunset. I hop onto Sepulveda to save ten minutes, so I can get to the fare in time. The Chins don't register the route change, so I don't explain it. Sepulveda dips and bends beneath the freeway's underpasses, and as we swing around the curves the Chins sway back and forth in perfect unison. *Weebles wobble but they don't fall down!* I remember this from TV somewhere as a kid. St. Louis? Cleveland? Driving sometimes puts me in this dreamy place where I remember strange details from my life: in one city, a bedspread covered with pictures of Cinderella; in another, the way you had to move the kitchen table to open the refrigerator. Miles go by like this without my noticing them; sometimes I'll reach a destination and have no idea how I got there.

Orange lights are flashing somewhere in my consciousness, like an alarm clock sneaking up on your sleep. My attention snaps back to the road. Up ahead, I see emergency vehicles and warning lights. We slow down and soon we aren't moving at all.

Mr. Chin bends forward to look out the windshield.

"Traffic," I explain. "Probably an accident."

He leans back and says something in Chinese to his wife. From her handbag she takes out a mirror and lipstick, which she applies with two perfect swipes. She purses her lips together, judges the result disinterestedly.

Ten minutes later, we are sitting in the same place, boxed in on one side by a line of cars; on the other, the road gives way to a gully. News choppers hover overhead. I pick up my radio.

"This is Twenty-two. Come in, Dispatch."

"I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm—unh!" Ruthie groans.

"You're a freak, you know that?" I say. "This is what you're hogging the frequency to tell me?"

"It's molasses out here. Better take me off the Sherman Oaks."

"Not to worry. I think it was Captain and Tennille."

"Who?"

"You're making me feel old, Babe."

"I'm gonna need a lot of quickies later to make up on my tips," I say.

"I'll take care of you," she says. "Just sit tight."

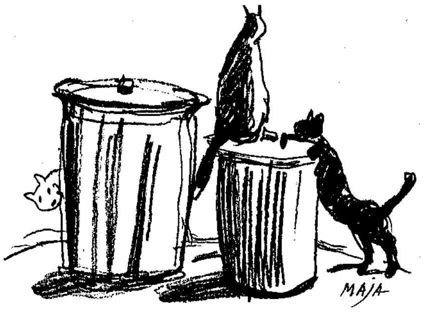
"That's all I can do."

I sign off and watch the traffic flowing easily on the southbound side of Sepulveda. You can be stuck or you can be going places. Usually it's just a matter of luck.

When I was eleven, my mother and I lived in Cleveland. All winter, the city was the color of dirty dishwater. People wore heavy coats and boots over their shoes and worried their way across icy streets, as though the road were covered with nails. We'd come up from Pensacola and had nothing warmer to wear than sweatshirts, so my mother took us over to the Salvation Army, where I picked out a hot-pink snow jacket and some blue boots that were a size too big. When I walked, my heels rubbed up and down inside, and after a few weeks all my socks had matching holes.

We lived in a part of town where every house was cut up into four equal apartments, like a kid's baloney sandwich. We had the bottom left-hand quarter. At school, a girl told me I lived in the "bad" part of town. What she really meant was that it was the black part of town, and it was true: we were the only white people on our block. But we had just come up from shitty neighborhoods in the South, and we knew how to get along.

The only nice thing for blocks



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around was a temple. It had a big gold dome and walls of polished stone, and had been built when this was still the good part of town. Now it was stuck here with no place to go, like the fat girl at a dance. After school, I often took the bus to the temple, where my mother worked as a cleaning lady. She'd make me sit quietly in the pews as she dusted the altar. The pews were covered with a rough maroon material and scratched the backs of my legs when I wore a skirt. I'd pass the time staring up at the dome, wondering whether all that gold was real or fake and whether I could climb up and scrape it off with my fingernails.

My mother hated Cleveland. She said that it was an ugly city, that the lake was so polluted it had caught on fire once, that months without sun made the people depressed and crazy. I wondered why she'd picked Cleveland if she felt this way, but I never asked. I already knew that certain questions made her nervous.

One day, after my mother was finished up at the temple, we took a bus to a part of town I'd never seen. All the buildings were one-story brick, with matching green roofs. There were no stores, there were "shoppes." Everything was very clean. We stopped in at a coffee shop and sat at a booth. Usually when we ate out, I understood that I was to order the cheapest thing on the menu or share whatever my mother had. But this time she said, "You want the steak plate? Have the steak plate. That's what I'm having."

I ordered the steak plate. We didn't talk much, and about twenty minutes later a man came in with a girl a few years older than me. The coffee shop wasn't crowded, but when he got to our booth he stopped and asked if they could sit with us. My mother said yes, if they wanted. The man sat down. The girl looked upset, but he told her to sit, and she did.

The waitress came with our plates, and the man ordered a B.L.T. for himself and a grilled cheese for the girl. I felt embarrassed about my steak and I stopped eating.

"Eat your food," my mother said, so I did.

The man had a wide face with two strong lines that cut down each cheek like the biggest dimples I'd ever seen. He didn't take off his coat and hat, and he drank his glass of ice water with his gloves on. He caught me looking at him, and before I looked away I saw him smile. My mother didn't talk to him, and he didn't talk to her. We just ate, and when the waitress brought their food the man and the girl ate, too. The girl had long hair, and it kept getting in her way. At one point, she found a hair in the melted cheese of her sandwich and started to pull. She pulled and pulled for what seemed a long time, concentrating as though she were playing a game with herself.

"It's mine," she determined when it finally came out, and continued to eat.

"You have long hair," my mother said. "You have to take care of that hair."

This seemed to stop everything. The man stopped chewing and put his sandwich down. The girl looked at him as if she wasn't sure what she was supposed to do.

"Answer the lady," he said.

"I brush it a hundred strokes in the morning and at night."

"Somebody must have taught you that," my mother said. I wasn't sure whether she was asking or telling. The girl didn't say anything.

We finished our steaks, and my mother washed hers down with coffee, then reached behind her and inched herself back into her coat. She slid out of the booth and turned to me.

"All right, Babe," she said. "We're done."

I was confused. We hadn't asked for a check and we hadn't left any money. But I put on my pink parka and followed my mother out the door and onto the street.

"I think we forgot to pay," I said once we were headed into the freezing wind toward the bus stop.

"We paid, all right," she said.

Another twenty minutes, and the traffic on Sepulveda hasn't moved a foot. I turn to talk to the Chins.

"Don't worry about the time. It's a flat rate."

They both smile, having no idea what I just said.

Ten minutes later, the Chins start to argue. He thinks one thing, she thinks another. That's all I can make out. She gestures once or twice toward the suitcase. Their voices yo-yo up and down like a twelve-year-old boy's.

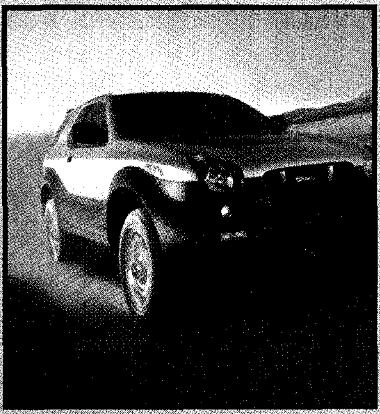
I see a cop about fifty feet in front of us. He's moving down the line of cars.

"Look!" I say. "Policeman here! He tell us!" I'm talking like a racist pig, but it seems like they might understand me if I skip some words.

Mr. Chin makes a low, deep rumble in his throat. I open my window and call out to the cop. He comes up to the car.

"What's up?" I ask.

"Accident," he says. He has a narrow



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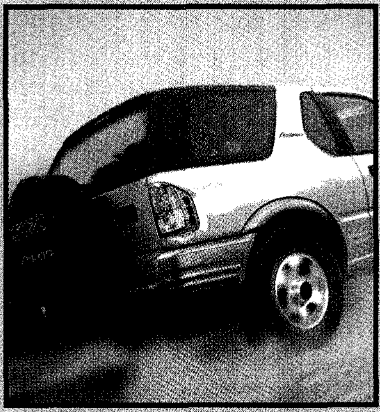

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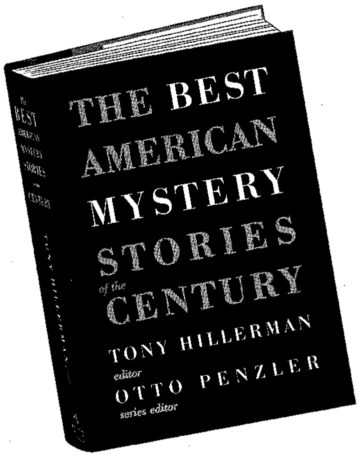
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face and his nose bends to the right.

"Just when I decide to take the fast route, right?"

"Happened over two hours ago."

"Oh," I say, realizing it doesn't take two hours to clean up a fender bender. "Somebody die?"

The cop nods. "Kids." There's a sad disgust in his voice. "My daughter wants one of those," he says, looking at my nose ring. "I told her it looks like you have a piece of dirt on your nose, or worse. No offense or anything."

"She's not doing it for you," I say. "No offense or anything."

For a second, he looks like he's going to get mad, but then he smiles.

"Ain't that the truth," he says.

He looks back at the Chins, who have gotten very quiet. I don't blame them. They've probably heard about the L.A.P.D. Someone told me that Rodney King video was shown something like five hundred times a day all over the world.

The cop nods toward the Chins. "Airport?"

"Don't speak a word of English, either."

"Welcome to L.A.," he says. I can't tell if he's talking about the Chins or to them. Then I hear a sound, like a muffled moan, coming from the back seat. I look in the rearview. Is Mrs. Chin getting sick in my car?

"Are you all right back there?" I say.

Mr. Chin looks up. His face has come alive, as though someone flipped a switch.

"O.K.," he says. "Everything O.K. here."

"You speak English?" I say, amazed and a little pissed.

The cop leans into the car to get a closer look at the Chins.

"There's been a bad accident," he says. "Car crash." He mimes driving, then slaps his hands together, looking pleased with his little bit of community service.

"Yes, yes," Mr. Chin says. "Absolutely car crash." He nods his head, trying to look like he understands what's going on. Suddenly I feel sorry for him.

"Well, that's all she wrote," the cop says, slapping his palms down on my door. "You'll see it all on the ten-o'clock news." He motions with his chin toward the sky where the choppers circle, their tails hovering above their bodies like wasps'.

Just as he leaves, I hear the sound again. It's coming from the suitcase. The Chins start arguing loudly.

"Jesus," I say to nobody in particular. "What the hell is going on back there?"

Mrs. Chin cries out as if she'd been stabbed, and Mr. Chin screams at her. The car in front of me inches forward, the first movement in about an hour. In the rearview, I see the cop turn around and begin to jog back toward the scene of the accident.

"Here we go," I say, as I put my foot on the gas. But just then Mr. Chin opens his door.

"Shut the door!" I yell. "We're moving!"

But Mr. Chin is already out on the side of the road, gesturing back at Mrs. Chin to hand him the suitcase. Before she has a chance to, he reaches in and yanks it from the car. Mrs. Chin follows, her skirt sliding up her thighs. The car in front of me has moved at least twenty feet, and the ones behind me are honking.

"Are you crazy?" I scream at the Chins. "Get back in the fucking car!"

By now, every car on Sepulveda is honking at me. A police cruiser moving in the opposite direction flashes its lights.

"Move the limo now!" a voice commands over the loudspeaker. Suddenly, the Chins throw the suitcase back into the car, slam the door, and take off, scrambling awkwardly down the embankment and disappearing under the freeway underpass.

I pull forward and grab my radio.

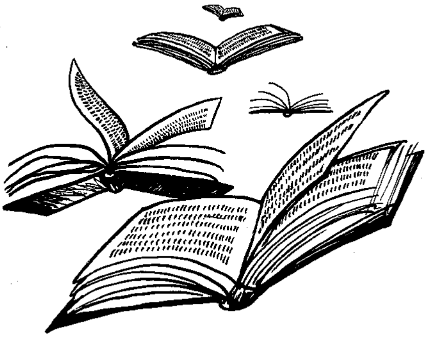
"God damn it, Ruthie, they bolted on me."

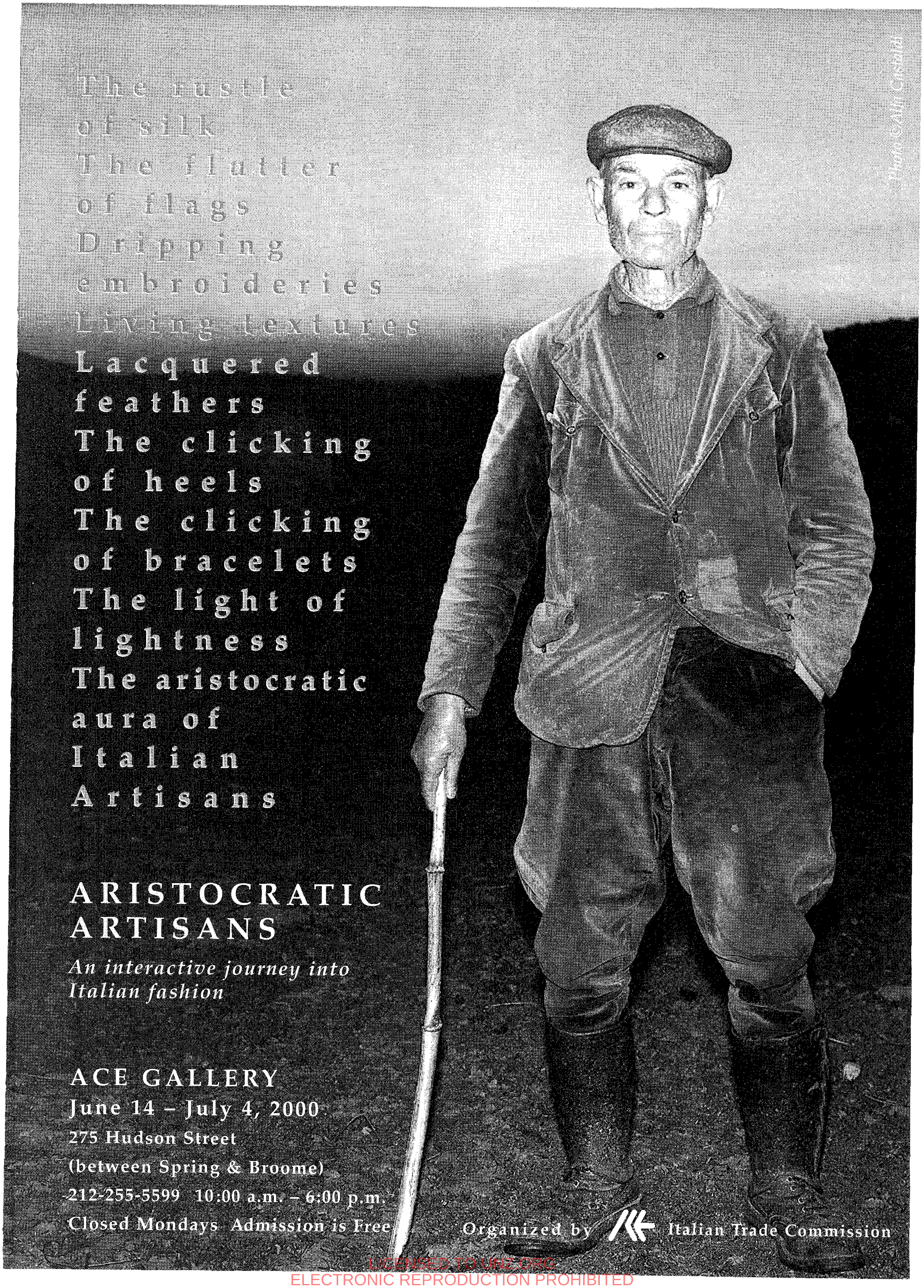
"Who? The little green men in your head?"

"My fare. My fucking Chins. They just dumped out of the car."

"Did they pay?"

"No, they did not pay!" I scream. Company policy: if a driver fails to

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collect a fare, the driver is responsible for said fare.

Another sound comes from the suitcase. It's louder now, like the wail of a feral cat.

"Something's in their goddam suitcase, Ruthie."

But Ruthie's moved on to other things. She's calling out a pickup in Malibu. It's a big fare, and two drivers start in on who's the closest.

At the next red light, I turn around and look at the suitcase lying on the back seat. I reach back and rap on it lightly. No sound. O.K. Batteries dead. Fine. But then I hear another muffled cry.

I pull a hard right off Sepulveda, cross the freeway, and start to thread my way into the dark hills on Mulholland. I find a small outcropping on the side of the road, some unofficial scenic spot. I head toward the edge of the cliff, stopping when I see the grid of lights down in the valley below me. With the car lights on and the motor running, I pull the suitcase from the back seat and lay it carefully on the ground. It's an old-style case and I have to push the metal tabs apart so the clasps flip up. My heart feels as heavy as a basketball, and, after I finally get up the nerve to pull the tabs I jump back in the car and slam the door. The suitcase doesn't open. Whatever is in there hasn't moved. I turn off the ignition and get out of the car. I find a stick in the bushes, hook it under the suitcase's lid, and lift it open. I hear somebody scream "Oh my God, Oh my God," but then I realize that the sound is coming from me. I look down and my mind finally understands what some part of me has already figured out: inside the suitcase is a baby.

The baby is almost new, maybe one or two months old. It's lying on a soiled yellowish cloth, making weird stuttery noises that don't exactly sound like breathing. A small tank lies next to it, and an oxygen mask that must once have covered its nose and mouth hangs down around its chin. A rank, rotten smell reaches me, and I see that the baby's wormy legs are caked with mustardy shit. I run over to the trees and puke.

After I pull myself together, I grab the jacket I keep in the trunk for cold

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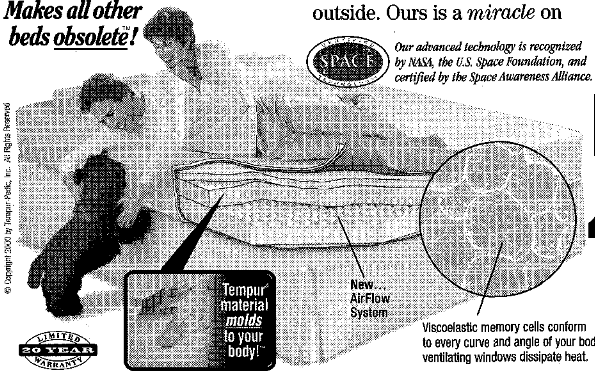
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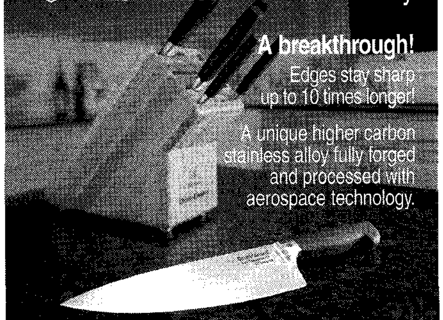

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nights and go back to the suitcase. The baby stares up at me with eyes as dark as black beans. I must be a monster to this kid. I pull the mask off over its sweaty head, lift the baby up, and cover it with my jacket. It weighs no more than a chicken and goes all limp and floppy in my hands. I have to keep it close to my chest so that it doesn't slip.

When I finally get the jacket tucked around the baby, I hold it out and take another look. It's awake, but its eyes wander off to the right as if they're tracking some lazy fly. Then its face seizes up in a look of pain, and, just as quickly, relaxes. Its eyes close.

I get this hot tingling sensation all over my body, the way you do when your gut realizes something before your head does: The baby's dead, I think. I hear myself moan out loud. I hold its body up to me again, its stink clouding my nostrils, my tears wetting its face. Then I feel air against my cheek. The baby is not dead, but it's as close to it as I am to its reeking stench. In a second, I have the baby in the car, strap it as best I can into the front seat, and I'm flying down the hill.

At the emergency room, the doctors treat me as if I were a criminal. They grab the baby and disappear behind a wall of green curtains. A nurse looks at me the way some of the teachers I remember from high school did. She probably thinks I'm the one who did this to the kid. I look around. The room is full of people slumped in yellow plastic chairs, their heads in their hands, staring off into the corners. One man is pressing a bloody rag to his arm. I find a seat, but another nurse comes to tell me that I have to wait in a different room. I can come on my own, she says, or security can escort me. Two guards in uniforms stand behind her, their hands casually crossed in front of their stomachs.

The second time my mother tried to kill herself, she used a razor blade to cut her wrists fifteen minutes before I was scheduled to go over for dinner—which gave me some idea of how serious she was. When I got to the house, she was standing at the bathroom sink, running water over her wounds.

"You'd think there would be a lot of blood," she said. Pink liquid ran over her forearms and into the cracked porcelain basin.

"You missed the vein," I said, lifting her arms out of the water and wrapping a towel tightly around the one she'd managed to cut into.

"I'm just a chickenshit, I guess," she said, allowing me to handle her like a rag doll.

I led her over to the bed, and she sat there silently for a long time as I held her arms, putting pressure on the cuts.

"You know," she said, "when it comes down to it, it's very difficult to kill yourself. The whole time you're doing it, your body is saying 'No! No!' and you're going 'Yes! Yes!' "

"If you really mean it, you use a gun."

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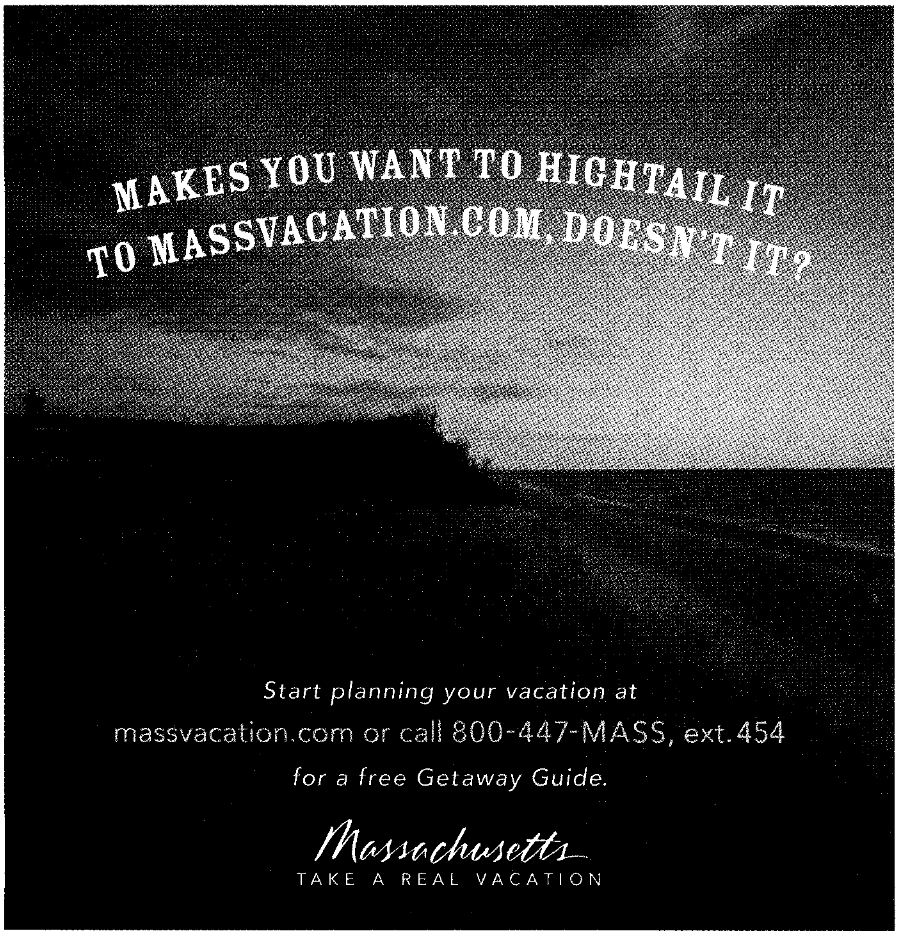

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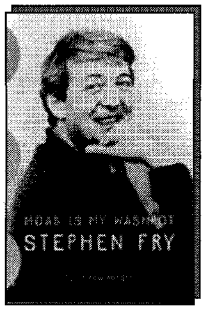

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"Oh," she said, shivering, as if the idea made her think of snakes or spiders. "I could never fire a gun."

"Then we're in luck."

I took off the towel. We watched a pearl of blood bubble up from the wound.

"I'm going to have a scar. I'll have to wear long sleeves from now on."

"You should have thought of that first."

"I'm not very good at thinking ahead."

I felt a fissure open up inside me, like one of those cracks in the sink. "You get by," I said. "You do O.K."

"I lose things," she said. "Then I regret it, but there's nothing I can do."

I had no idea what she was talking about. "You worry too much," I said. "And about all the wrong things."

"What are the right things to worry about?"

I stood up and got a box of Band-Aids from the bathroom cabinet.

"This is all you have?" I say, waving a "Star Wars" Band-Aid in the air.

"They were on sale. I guess the craze has died down."

"Well, there's one thing you don't have to worry about," I said. "No more Boba Fett fanatics on Hollywood Boulevard."

She smiled and cocked her head to the side, as if to admire me from another angle.

"Stay for a while," she said.

"Eventually I'll have to go."

"That's always the way."

The detention room is actually a closet. Inside is a metal table and a couple of chairs just like the ones in the waiting room. I try the knob; the door's locked from the outside. The only fresh air comes from a ventilation grate high up above the door. Somebody has left a copy of a fitness magazine on the table, as if you might want to tone up on your way to prison. I flip through it and read about busting flab.

About half an hour later, a cop comes in. She's young. She's taken a lot of time on her looks: her hair is done up in a neat twist, and she's outlined her maroon lipstick with a lip pencil. She has two gold posts in

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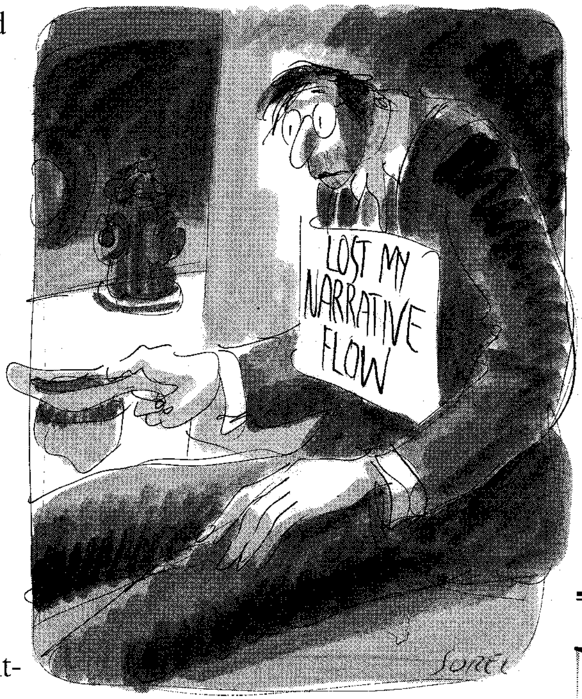

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each ear. She takes out a notepad and asks me a lot of questions. Who am I? Where do I live? When did I have this baby?

"It's not my baby."

"We can have you examined."

"Fine. Examine me. I've never had a baby. I'm tight as a drum."

"Don't be nasty," she says.

"Let me tell you where I got this baby."

"Tell me."

I tell her the whole story. She doesn't believe a word I say. I tell her to call Ruthanne. I tell her about the cop at the traffic accident. She asks for his name. I don't know it. I tell her where I left the suitcase on Mulholland.

"Did you get a good look at the baby?" I ask her, when it becomes clear that nothing I'm saying is convincing her. "It's fully Asian."

She looks at me blankly, as if the logic escapes her.

"You think I'd stick my baby in a suitcase and then bring it to the emergency room?"

She shoots me a look that says I'd better shut up before I sink myself. I realize how serious this is, how close I am to getting arrested, and how there is nothing in my life—no person, no job, no past—that will make me seem legit.

She takes some notes, says something unintelligible into her radio, then leaves the room.

After what feels like a long time, the cop comes back in with a man in a suit. A badge hangs off his lapel. He introduces himself to me; he's from Immigration. He's holding the suitcase. He lays it on the table and takes out his own notepad.

"Is this the case you found in your car, Ma'am?" the man says, writing on the pad.

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

I have the feeling that if I say the wrong thing I'll be shoved up against the wall with my hands behind my back.

"It ought to have a tank inside," I say. "An oxygen tank. I took it off the baby when I found him. Or her. I don't even know what sex it is."

Neither of them answers me. The man nods at the cop, and she puts on plastic gloves and opens the case. A rancid odor rises up out of it, and the cop and the man reel. The soiled blankets are balled up in the corner. The tank is there with its tiny mask, looking sinister, the way all hospital equipment does. I hear a small moan, and for a minute I think my mind is playing tricks on me and I'm hearing the baby again. But when I look up I see that the cop has her hand over her mouth and she's crying.

I visited my mother once at her desert community. Everyone smiled and hugged me all the time. She's happy there; she now believes that all her breakdowns happened for a reason. If she hadn't lost it in Texas, for instance, we'd never have made it West, where she'd have the opportunity to lose it in L.A. It's disaster justification.

When she decided to move, I went to her house in Laurel Canyon to help her pack. She didn't have much—mostly clothes, a few decorative pots and pictures she'd picked up at flea markets. The rest of the furniture had come with the rental.

"You move around as much as we do," she said, "you learn to live light."

"I'm not going anywhere."

She looked at me. "You like it here, don't you?"

I shrugged. "It's no different from anyplace else. So what's the point of leaving?"

"I wish I felt that way. But somehow, after a while, a place just starts to seem like a splinter, you know? Like something you have to get rid of before it gets infected."

"I remember Florida," I said. "The electric eel at the aquarium. That was Florida, right?"

"Um," she said, distracted by packing. Or maybe she was packing to be distracted.

"And Washington, right? And Texas? That man who tried to get you to ride a horse?"

"He was a fool, that's for sure," she said.

"Cleveland was cold. Remember that man and the girl at the coffee shop?"

The look that shot across her face startled me. It made me think about all the people she must have dropped along the way. And then I thought: I really had no idea about the things that went on in my life.

"You have some memory," she said, finally.

"Who were they, those people?"

"Strangers."

She didn't say anything else for the rest of the time we packed. I felt the way I always had—that I couldn't ask any more. I'd reached the limit of what she could give me, or wanted to.

When we were finally done and her bags had been stuffed into the small car, she took my face in her hands.

"I'm going to forget everything that's ever happened to me," she said, smiling. "My life begins now."

I'm standing in the parking lot outside the emergency room. People move in and out between the cars, coming and going. It's after midnight, and all this activity stands out against the hour. Bad luck happens day or night, but things that happen in the dark can trouble you to the core. On television, you see pictures of fires against the night sky, and it looks like there's nowhere to run. Or the bewilderment of a nighttime blackout leaves you wary and alone. The baby was a girl. They told me that much once they let me off the hook. It was a baby girl, and it's likely she was for sale. Maybe the Chins—that's probably a fake name—were going to make the money, or maybe they were just the ride, taking her from one place to another.

In either case, some mother gave that baby away. Maybe she needed the cash, or maybe she thought her baby would do better without her. Maybe she'd once seen a postcard of a palm tree or a movie star and thought that in Los Angeles, U.S.A., her little girl would find Paradise. Who knows, maybe she will. ◆

From the Daily Cardinal, a student newspaper of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Curtis also advised students to visit UW-Madison Police & Security, 1429 Monroe St.

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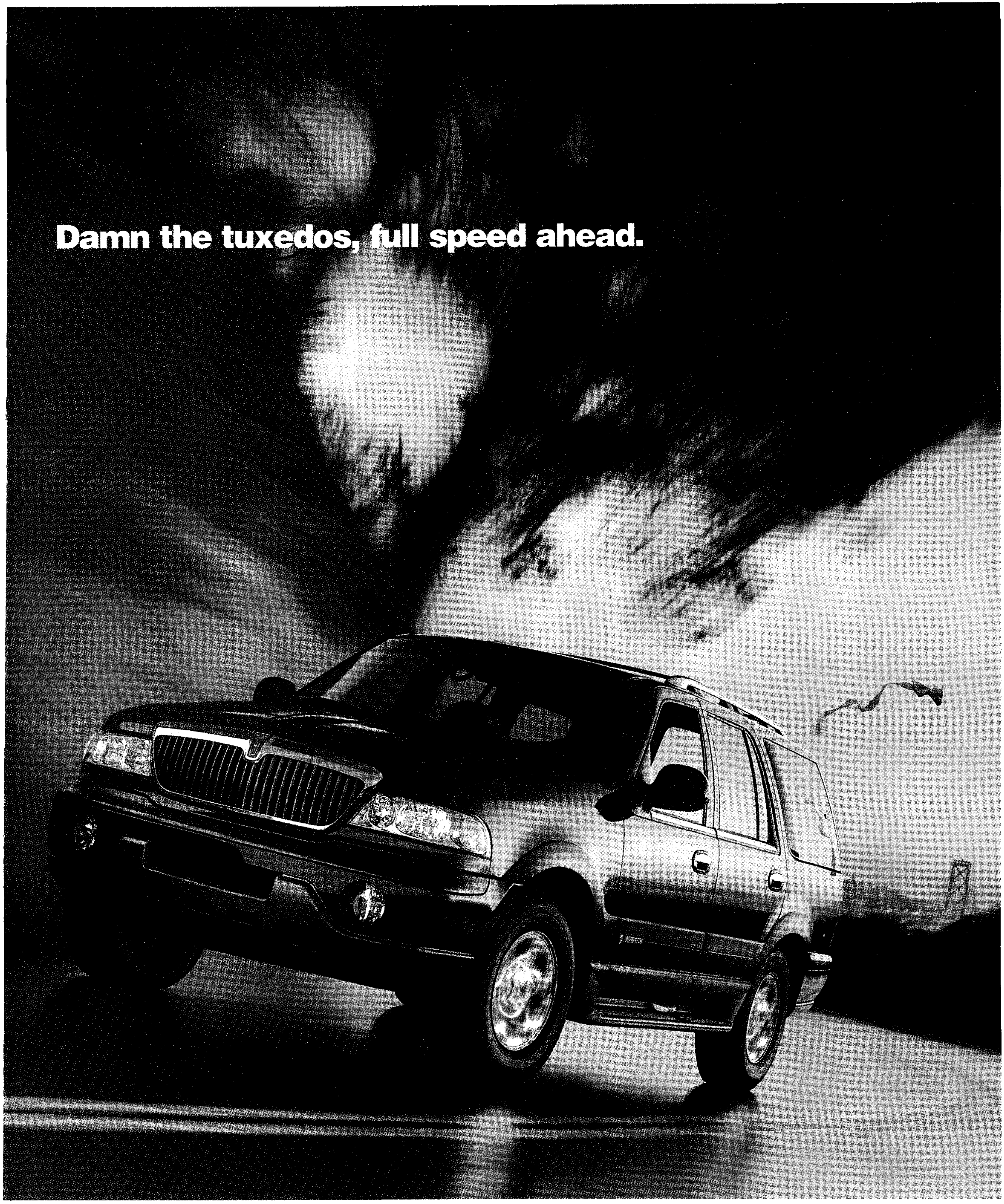

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FICTION

THE SMOKER

BY DAVID SCHICKLER

Douglas Kerchek taught twelfth-grade advanced-placement English at St. Agnes High School on West Ninety-seventh and Broadway, and Nicole Bonner was the standout in his class. She was the tallest, at five feet ten, the oldest, at nineteen, and the smartest, with a flawless A. She wasn't the prettiest, Douglas thought—not beside the spunky nose of Rhonda Phelps or Meredith Beckermann's heart-shaped derrière—but Nicole was dangerously alluring. She had a chopped black Cleopatra haircut and wise blue eyes, and her recent essay on "Othello" had ended with this note:

> Dear Mr. Kerchek:
>
> Last night in bed I read Fear + Loathing in L.V. It is puerile, self-involved gamesmanship. I suppose I don't love drugs enough, although my parents make me drink brandy with them every night. They consider it a gesture of affection.
>
> I saw you yesterday, outside the locker room, changing your shoes to go running, and your ankle looked quite blue. What did you bang it on?
>
> Respectfully,
> Nicole Bonner

This note caused Douglas some concern. He, too, disliked Hunter S. Thompson, but Nicole had also written "in bed" and mentioned his bruise. It was Nicole's habit to do this, to call out random, intimate specifics from the world around her and bring them to Douglas's attention. She'd done it that day in class.

"Iago is filled with lust, Mr. Kerchek," said Jill Eckhard.

"He's a Machiavellian bastard," said Rhonda Phelps.

"You know what's an excellent word to say out loud repeatedly?" Nicole Bonner chewed her hair. "'Rinse.' Think about it, Mr. Kerchek. Rinse. *Rinse.*"

That evening, as always, Douglas walked home to his shabby studio apartment. Douglas was thirty-one. He lived alone, five blocks north of St. Agnes, in an apartment building filled with Mexican men who drank Pabst and held boisterous, high-stakes poker games every night in the lobby outside Douglas's first-floor apartment. They were amiable, violent men, and their nickname for Douglas was Uno, because whenever he sat with them he had one quiet beer, then bowed out.

"Uno," cackled the Mexicans. "Come take our money, Uno."

"Fuck us up, Uno."

A twelve-year-old boy named Chiapas rattled a beer can. "Come get your medicine, Uno."

Douglas grinned wanly, waved them off, and opened his door.

Rinse, he thought, frowning. Rinse. *Rinse.*

After a quick sandwich, Douglas corrected essays. He was a fastidious, tough grader. Also, he had short black sideburns with streaks of gray in them, a boxer's build, a Ph.D. in English literature from Harvard, and no wife or girlfriend. These qualities made Douglas a font of intrigue for the all-female population of St. Agnes—both the lay faculty and the students—but in truth Douglas led a sedentary life. He loved books, he was a passionate, solitary filmgoer, and he got his hair cut every four weeks by Chiapas, whose father ran a barbershop down the block. All told, Douglas was a quiet and, he thought, happy man. He was also the only male teacher at St. Agnes. Cheryl, Audrey, and Katya, the three single women on the faculty, would have taken up the crusade of dating him, but he wasn't drawn to his coworkers. Cheryl wore electric shades of suède that confused him, Audrey had two cops for ex-husbands, and Katya, despite her long legs and Lithuanian accent, was cruel to the girls. So Douglas spent his nights alone seeing films, correcting essays, and occasionally chatting with Chiapas and company. On this particular night, Douglas was barely into his stack of essays when the phone rang.

"Hello?" sighed Douglas. He expected it to be his mother, who called weekly from Pennsylvania to see if her son had become miraculously engaged.

"Good evening, Mr. Kerchek."

Douglas frowned. "Nicole?"

"Yes, sir."

"How did you get this number?"

"Off the Rolodex in the principal's office. How's your ankle?"

Douglas sneezed, twice. He did this instinctively when he didn't know what to say.

"God bless you," said Nicole.

"Thank you," said Douglas. He glanced around, as if expecting his apartment suddenly to fill with students.

"How's your ankle?"

"It's . . . it's all right. I banged it on my radiator."

"Really?"

The truth was, Douglas had slipped in his shower, like an elderly person.

"Yes, really. Nicole—"

"Do you know what's happening to *my* ankle as we converse?"

"No."

"John Stapleton is licking it. He likes to nibble my toes, too."

Douglas blinked several times.

"John Stapleton is a domestic shorthair. Sometimes he licks, other times he nibbles."

"I see," said Douglas. There was a substantial pause.

"John Stapleton is a cat," said Nicole.

"Of course," agreed Douglas.

"Do you enjoy gnocchi?"

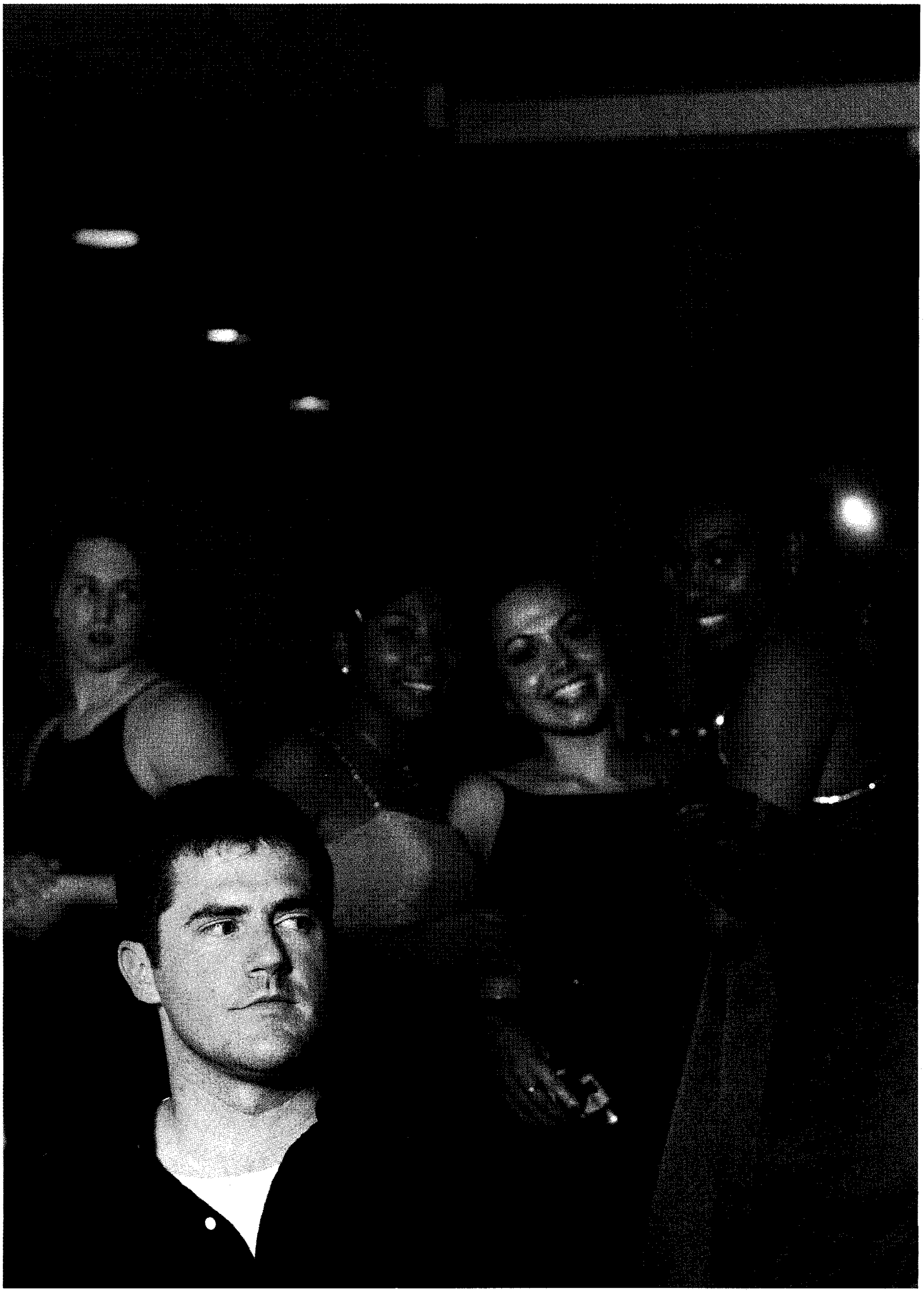
Douglas set his essays on the couch beside him. "Pardon?"

"Gnocchi. Italian potato dumplings. We had them for dinner tonight. Father makes them by hand every Thursday. It's the only thing Father knows how to cook, but he's good at it."

Douglas crossed his ankle over his knee.

"So, do you enjoy them?" said Nicole.

"Gnocchi?"



David Schickler at the Harley Allendale Columbia prom, in Rochester, New York. Photograph by Andrea Artz.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"Yes meaning you enjoy them, or yes meaning you understood what I was asking?"

"Yes. I mean yes, I like them."

Nicole Bonner laughed.

"When should I start hearing from colleges?" she asked. "It's nearly April."

Douglas was relieved at the topic. "Any week now. But you'll get in everywhere. It's all about what you want."

"I want Princeton."

Douglas imagined Nicole sitting on a dorm bed, reading, sipping soup. He imagined baggy sweater sleeves covering her wrists.

"Fitzgerald went there," said Nicole.

"Yes," said Douglas.

"He was a career alcoholic."

"Yes."

"Did you know that John Stapleton is toilet trained?"

Douglas laughed out loud, once. This usually happened only at the movies, if he was alone and the film was absurd.

"Toilet trained. Meaning what?"

"Meaning that he uses the toilet, like a human being. He crouches on the rim of the bowl and does his business and presses his paw on the flusher afterward. He's very tidy."

"Nicole," said Douglas.

"It's the truth, sir. It took Father aeons to train him, but he did it. We don't even have a litter box. Father was a marine."

Douglas checked his watch. "John Stapleton's an unusual name for a cat."

"He's an unusual cat," said Nicole.

"I think maybe I should hang up now, Nicole. Why don't we talk in school tomorrow?"

"All right. I don't want to inconvenience you in your evening time."

"It's all right."

"Really?"

"Well," said Douglas. "What I mean is, it's no problem. But, um, we'll talk in school tomorrow."

"Inevitably," said Nicole.

Douglas had written Nicole a letter of recommendation for Princeton. In the letter he'd said this:

> Whether she's tearing across the field-hockey grass, debunking Whitman, or lecturing me about Woody Allen films, Nicole exudes an irrepressible spirit and a generous, unguarded tenacity. She reads an entire novel every night, not to impress anyone but because she loves to do it. She is organized, clever, and kindhearted, and once she knows what she wants she will pursue a thing—a line of argument, a hockey ball, a band to hire for the prom—with a charmingly ruthless will.

Douglas prided himself on his recommendations, on making his students shine on paper. It was one of the few vanities he allowed himself. When it came to crafting words, Douglas felt that he'd been blessed with a knack for always knowing what to say. That was why, the morning after the call from Nicole, Douglas awoke feeling flummoxed. He'd spent ten minutes on the phone with a nineteen-year-old girl and tripped over his tongue like a schoolboy the whole time. During the night, he'd also dreamed he'd been walking barefoot down a beach with Nicole. In the dream, she wore a lowrider black bikini and a lovely blue scarf in her hair like Jackie Kennedy. Douglas, meanwhile, wore green Toughskins jeans and a shirt made of burlap. Every time the waves washed over their feet, Douglas scampered back and yelled, "Beware the manatees!"

Ridiculous, thought Douglas. Embarrassing. He put on a smart coat and tie, and decided to give the girls a pop quiz.

At school, in the faculty lounge, he forced himself to make small talk with Cheryl, the suède-clad mathematician. When the bell rang for his class, Douglas strode into the classroom with confidence.

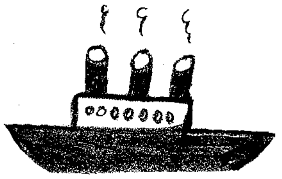
"Mr. Kerchek." Meredith Beckermann jumped from her desk. "Jill's going to ask you to come watch softball today, but you promised to see our Forensics meet against Regis, remember?"

"I remember," said Douglas.

"Suckup," Jill told Meredith.

Meredith glared at Jill. "Avaunt, and quit my sight," she sniffed.

Douglas set his satchel on his desk, surveyed the room. His advanced-placement class consisted of six girls, the brightest lights in the St. Agnes senior class. There were Meredith and Jill, the arguers; Rhonda Phelps, the bombshell achiever; Kelly DeMeer, the agnostic; Nancy Huck, who was always on vacation; and Nicole Bonner, who sat by the window.



"Where's Nancy?" asked Douglas.

"Bermuda," said Rhonda. "Snorkeling, with her aunt."

Jill tapped her copy of "Othello." "Can we discuss the last act?"

"Desdemona's a dipshit," said Meredith.

"Meredith," Douglas warned. He glanced at Nicole, then at Kelly. They spoke the least of the six, Kelly because she was cultivating spiritual fatigue and Nicole because . . . Well, thought Douglas, because she was Nicole. The look in her eyes when she stared out the window reminded Douglas of when he was a boy and he would gaze at his mother's dressing-room mirror, wondering who lived on the other side.

"Vocab quiz," said Douglas.

The girls cleared their desks. They whipped out pens and blank pieces of paper.

"Three synonyms, from Latin roots, for 'bellicose.'" Douglas thought out loud. "Two antonyms for 'abstruse.' One example of synecdoche. Extra credit, list four books by Melville. You have five minutes."

The girls began writing immediately. Douglas watched them with fondness. They were gifted young women, and they would all conquer this class and every literature class in their future. He passed among them, staring at their bent heads, at the roots of their hair and their earlobes, wondering how many had prom dates, how many might end up teachers, how quickly Rhonda would marry. He rolled his eyes at Meredith's and Jill's papers: each of them already had seven synonyms for "bellicose." Kelly had finished in three minutes, and was now drawing hangman nooses—her trademark—on all of her "T"s. Then Douglas looked over Nicole's shoulder. Her paper was in a band of sunlight, and on it she had written no vocabulary words whatsoever. She was, however, busily churning out sentences. Douglas watched, then caught his breath. Nicole had written verbatim, from memory, the entire first page of "Moby-Dick," and was still going. Douglas waited to see if she would run out of steam or turn her head to look at him, but she didn't.

Douglas leaned down. He could smell Nicole's raspberry shampoo. He scribbled in the margin of her paper, "This isn't what I asked for."

Without glancing up, Nicole crossed out what he'd set down and wrote, "It is a far, far better thing that I do."

"Pens down," said Douglas.

After school, he performed his daily regimen, half an hour of free weights followed by a three-mile run in Central Park. He got back to St. Agnes with just enough time for a shower before the Forensics match. Outside the locker room, lounging on her back on a windowsill eight feet off the ground, was Nicole Bonner.

"How'd you get up there?" panted Douglas. He was winded from his run.

"Flew." Nicole sat up, studied her teacher. Douglas had a privileged view of her ankles, which were crossed and not at all blue. She wore low black pumps.

"What'd you read last night?" he asked.

" 'The Moviegoer.' Walker Percy. Did you know, Mr. Kerchek, that thousands of runners die every year from heart attacks in mid-workout?"

"I don't think I run fast enough to induce cardiac trauma, Nicole."

The girl on the ledge didn't swish her legs. Even when she chewed her hair, Douglas thought, she didn't do it nervously. She made it seem correct.

" 'Trauma' is an excellent word to say out loud repeatedly. Trauma. Trauma."

"I should shower," said Douglas.

Nicole pointed at him. "Give me one good reason why I should go to college at all."

"Tons of reading time," said Douglas.

Nicole jumped off the ledge, landed lightly on her feet a yard from Douglas.

"I'll accept that," she said, and off she walked.

It was three weeks later, on a rainy Tuesday morning in mid-April, that Douglas received the invitation. Just before chapel, Nicole Bonner poked her head into the faculty lounge, where Douglas and Katya Zarov sat beside each other on the couch. Douglas was reading the paper, and Katya had just noticed a run in her stocking.

"Mr. Kerchek," said Nicole.

Douglas and Katya looked up.

"No students in here," said Katya.

"Mr. Kerchek, I need to speak to you privately." Nicole stood with her hands behind her back like a butler.

Douglas stood. Katya Zarov made a little snort.

"Fine, but until you chop off my head you will do what I say."

Out in the hall, Nicole flashed Douglas a smile.

"Princeton's taking me," she said.

Douglas had a fleeting image of hugging his student. He patted her once on the shoulder.

"That's wonderful," he said. "Congratulations."

Nicole nodded sharply. She had a Bible under one arm, which surprised Douglas.

"As a thank-you for your letter of recommendation, my parents and I would like you to join us for dinner this Thursday at our home."

"Well," said Douglas, "that's very kind, but there's no need."

"We'll be serving gnocchi that Father will have prepared by hand. I've assured Father that you enjoy gnocchi."

"Nicole," began Douglas.

The bell for chapel rang.

"You told me that you enjoy gnocchi, Mr. Kerchek."

"Oh, I do," said Douglas quickly. "But— Listen, Nicole, I'm very proud that you've gotten into Princeton, but you don't have to—"

"I'm reading the Book of Revelation." Nicole tapped the Bible. "In case you were wondering."

Girls surged past Douglas and Nicole, chattering, chapel-bound.

"Come on, Nicky," said Rhonda Phelps.

"Good morning, Mr. Kerchek," said Audrey Little, the horny health teacher.

Nicole cocked her head to one side. "Did you know, Mr. Kerchek, that there are creatures in the Book of Revelation covered entirely with eyeballs?"

Douglas shook his head. He felt slightly dizzy, in need of ibuprofen.

"My parents and I will expect you at seven on Thursday." Nicole stepped backward. "We live in the Preëmption apartment building, West Eighty-second and Riverside."

"Preëmption?" called Douglas, but Nicole Bonner had turned away.

On Thursday afternoon, Douglas got his hair cut at the corner barbershop. Chiapas, who wasn't yet five feet tall, stood on a milk crate, moving an electric razor over Douglas's sideburns, grinning at him in the mirror.

"You a week early, Uno. Hot date tonight?"

Douglas smirked. "Yeah, right."

Chiapas whistled a tune Douglas didn't know. Because Chiapas was only an apprentice, Douglas got his haircuts for free, but, in what he recognized as a ridiculous instinct, Douglas felt he was keeping the boy out of trouble.

"Bet you got a date, Uno. Bet you and Grace Kelly going out for langostino."

"Uh-huh."

Chiapas knew Douglas's movie addictions.

"Ow." Douglas flinched, and Chiapas

pulled the razor away. Douglas turned his head. Two inches below his part, the razor had bitten his hair down to the scalp.

"Whoops." Chiapas shrugged. "Sorry, Uno."

Douglas fingered the gash. "Chiapas. Today of all days."

The boy's eyes lit up. "You do got a date."

Douglas blushed. "I do not."

Chiapas inspected Douglas's head. The cutaway hair was in the shape of a question mark without the period. "Don't worry, Uno. It's cool. She'll love it."

"There is no she," insisted Douglas.

At 7 P.M., Douglas arrived at the Preemption. He wore a camel's-hair sports coat, and he carried a German chocolate cake from Café Mozart. He'd thought first to bring wine, then decided it was inappropriate, since Nicole was his student.

In the lobby, Douglas was met by a tall black doorman with an oval scar on his forehead. "Douglas Kerchek?" said the doorman. "This way."

Douglas followed the doorman to an ancient Otis elevator, the hand-operated kind. "Top floor. Penthouse." The doorman ushered Douglas into the elevator, pulled a lever, and stepped out. "*Bonne chance.*"

The elevator doors closed, and Douglas was alone, moving. The mahogany walls smelled like something Douglas couldn't place, a medieval monks' library, maybe, or the inside of a coffin. When he disembarked, the door to the Bonner penthouse was already open. Nicole stood leaning against the jamb.

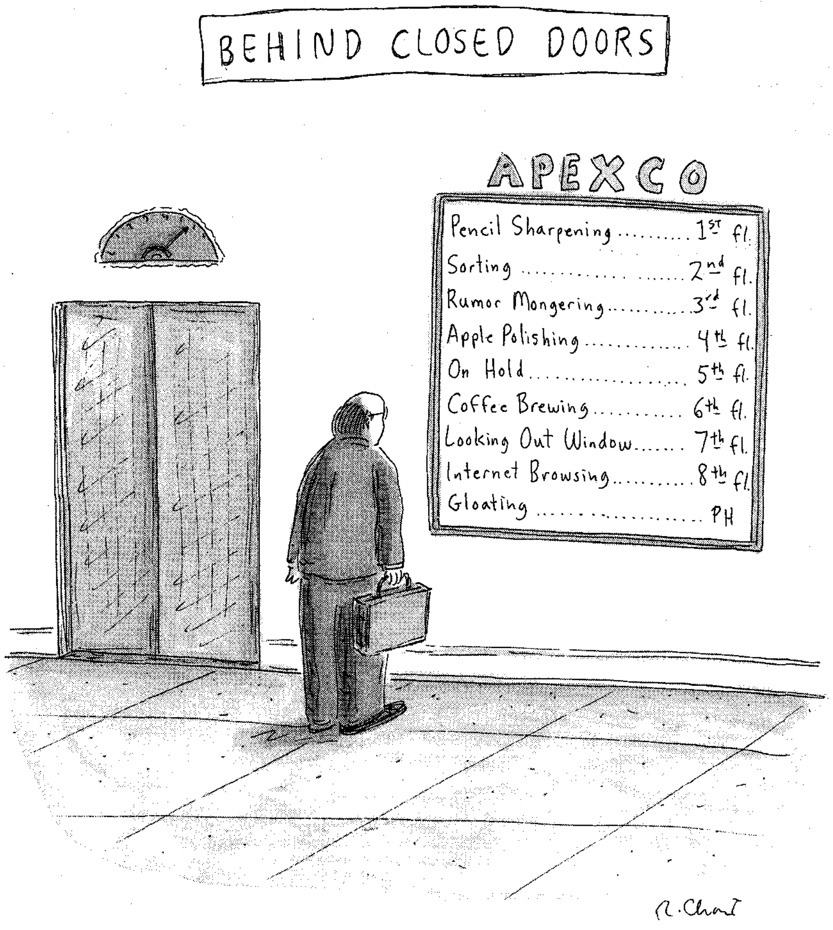
"Good evening, Mr. Kerchek."

Douglas made an effort not to widen his eyes. Nicole was wearing the most exquisite black silk evening gown he'd ever seen. It lay along the lines and curves of her body so perfectly that the material might have been woven around her as she stood there in the doorway. The gown was exactly as black as her hair, and, for a fantastic second, Douglas imagined that crushed black diamonds and the ink of several squid had gone into making the silk.

"Hello, Nicole," said Douglas. "You look . . . really nice."

"You have a question mark on your head," said Nicole.

Douglas sneezed, twice. Nicole blessed him. A man and a woman appeared behind her.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Rumor Mongering .... 3rd fl.
Apple Polishing .... 4th fl.
On Hold .... 5th fl.
Coffee Brewing .... 6th fl.
Looking Out Window .... 7th fl.
Internet Browsing .... 8th fl.
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"My parents," said Nicole, not looking at them.

"Samson," announced the man.

"Paulette," said the woman, smiling.

Samson Bonner resembled a gigantic bass instrument. He was well over six feet tall, and although his torso sloped massively forward around the abdomen, it appeared to be formidably muscled. His voice was resoundingly deep, almost a shout, and his eyes were black. He was a renowned lawyer of unwavering conservative politics.

His wife, Paulette, was as skinny and straight as a flute.

"The teacher, the teacher," chirped Paulette. "Come in, come in."

They all moved inside. Samson Bonner shut the door. Paulette whisked Douglas's cake box off to another room.

"Cocktails," boomed Samson.

Douglas looked around. The Bonner penthouse was the kind of lair that nefarious urbanites like Lex Luthor occupied in films. The huge main room had a high ceiling and a marble floor. Lining one entire wall were shelves bearing leather-bound books that, for all Douglas knew, could be traced to the same monks' library he'd smelled in the elevator. Also in the room were two hunter-green couches, a hearth with a fire, a glass table laid for dinner, an oaken door that opened onto a study, and three tall windows. Through these, Manhattan could be seen, laid out like a map on which schemes were planned.

Paulette Bonner swept back into view, carrying a tray of glasses and a cocktail shaker. "Sidecars, Sidecars." She set the tray on an end table by the couches.

"We're a brandy family, Douglas," said Samson. "We have a gusto for brandy."

"Ho ho," said Douglas. He'd meant it to sound chipper and hale, but it didn't.

The women sat on one couch, the men on the other. Samson Bonner wore a fine, bone-colored suit. His wife, who had black hair like Nicole's, wore a gray dress. The fire crackled. Douglas sipped his drink, which tasted like limes. In his home town, Allentown, Pennsylvania, very few drinks contained limes.

"I'm so proud of Nicole," said Douglas. "Um, you must be, too."

"We are, we are," breathed Paulette.

"Well, hell." Samson Bonner punched

Douglas on the shoulder. "Just because Princeton has a white-boy hoop club doesn't mean they can't compete. Am I wrong?"

"No," said Douglas, whose shoulder now hurt.

"So they're pick-and-roll," declared Samson. "So they're old-school backdoor. So what?"

"We're so pleased you've come," said Paulette.

Douglas glanced back and forth between the parents. Despite their bookshelves, he couldn't tell yet whether they were literary, like their daughter.

"How's your Sidecar, Mr. Kerchek?" asked Nicole.

"It's brandy and Cointreau," explained Paulette.

"And limes!" shouted Samson.

Douglas smiled and nodded.

"Anyway," said Samson, "let's hear from the man." He patted Douglas's back.

A silence ensued. Douglas grinned foolishly until it hit him.

"What, you mean me?"

The Bonners sat waiting, looking at Douglas.

"Well." Douglas scratched his recently botched head. "What would you like to hear about?"

"Hell, we don't know." Samson har-hared.

"You want to hear about me? That I'm from Pennsylvania, that kind of thing?" Douglas looked at Nicole.

"Nah," said Samson. "Teach us something."

"Yes." Paulette's eyes flashed.

"Teach us something," said Samson, "or else no gnocchi for you."

Douglas laughed. No one joined him.

Nicole cleared her throat. "Father's serious, Mr. Kerchek." She peered at her teacher over her glass. "He gets like this. You have to teach him and my mother something or the evening can't progress."

Douglas gazed at his student. He saw that she was in earnest, then he looked quickly away. Nicole's hair was pulled back taut against her head tonight, and Douglas feared that if he stared too long at the taper of her temples her father, the marine, would notice.

"Um. What would you like to learn?"

"Hell, we're easy." Samson punched Douglas again.

"Teach them a word," suggested Nicole. "Something quick. I'm hungry."

Douglas moved to the edge of the couch, out of Samson's range. He thought of things he knew well. He thought of books.

"I suppose," said Douglas, "I suppose I could tell you why I think Shakespeare named 'King Lear' 'King Lear.'"

Paulette looked anxious, as if Douglas were in peril.

"*Leer* is the German word for empty. And 'King Lear' is an existential play. The title character ends up mad, out in the wilderness, living in a hovel, like Job. He's a man stripped down, all alone with the truth of himself." Douglas raised his eyebrows. "An empty man."

"Bravo!" shouted Samson. He jabbed toward Douglas's shoulder, but Douglas stood up quickly. He poured himself a fresh Sidecar.

"Empty, empty." Paulette sounded delighted.

Nicole narrowed her eyes. "You never taught us that."

"What?" said Douglas.

"We read 'King Lear' last November. You never taught us about the German. About the name."

Douglas shrugged. He set down the cocktail shaker. "Well, it's just a theory I have. It's nothing proven."

"Wrong." Samson pointed at Douglas. "It's the truth. I know the truth when I hear it."

"Well," said Douglas.

"It's the truth and you found it." Samson gave Douglas the thumbs-up. "The evening can progress."

Nicole stood. "I think it's damn selfish, that's what I think." She glared at Douglas.

"What is?" said Douglas.

"You," snapped Nicole. "You, keeping your precious little theory all secret from your students."

"Now, wait a minute," said Douglas.

"No." Nicole crossed her arms under her breasts in a manner that Douglas could not ignore. "You're our teacher, Mr. Kerchek. You're supposed to lay bare your thoughts on behalf of us girls."

"Looks like he kept some thoughts for himself." Samson winked at Douglas.

"Hmph." Nicole raised her chin, which made Douglas see her neck, the shadowy knife of her cleavage. "I am absolutely disappointed," she said icily, "and I will not speak again tonight until after the salad course."

Nicole left the couch and took her place at the table.

Samson rubbed his hands together. "Let's eat!" he cried.

During the shrimp cocktail, Douglas related much of his life to the Bonners. He was nervous because Nicole was moody and silent, and he ended up blurting out the stories of his postgraduate year in Japan, his bout with mononucleosis, his disastrous senior prom with Heather Angelona.

"You're feeling all right now, though?" said Samson.

Douglas looked up from his salad. "Sir?"

"You've recovered, I mean. From the mono."

"Oh. Yes, sir. I had it thirteen years ago."

"Bravo." Samson wolfed a chunk of cucumber. "Look, no more of this 'sir' business. I'm Samson, dammit."

"All right." Douglas tried to catch Nicole's eye. She sat across from him, while Samson and Paulette sat at the long ends of the table. When Nicole stared only into her salad, Douglas switched his gaze to the book wall behind her.

"So, Samson," said Douglas. "Paulette. Those are some wonderfully bound books there. Have you read most of them?"

Samson stared hard at Douglas. He let ten seconds pass.

"Douglas," said Samson. "I have read each and every one of them cover to cover."

"Really?" Douglas scanned the shelves again. "That's unbelievable."

Samson scowled. "Oh, is that what it is, Mr. Harvard? Unbelievable?"

"I'm sorry," said Douglas quickly.

"You're a contentious bastard," declared Samson.

Douglas's stomach bottomed out, the way it had in high school before his boxing matches. "Samson. Mr. Bonner. I certainly meant no insult."

"Ha!" shouted Samson. "Got you!"

Douglas looked at the Bonner women, who wore thin, knowing smirks.

"What?" said Douglas.

"I was giving you the business, Doug," chuckled Samson. "Had to test your mettle."

"Oh." Douglas took a gulp of his wine. "Ha-ha," he said weakly.

"I shall now rejoin the conversation," said Nicole.

"Hell." Samson pointed his fork at

the books. "I've never read a single one of those things, Doug. They're a priceless collection."

"They're heirlooms," said Paulette.

"Right, heirlooms." Samson chewed and swallowed. "Nicole reads them. They belonged to my ancestor Vladimir Bonner. He was a prince from the Carpathian Mountains or some crazy bastard place." Samson waved his hand dismissively. "The point is, he was a prince, and these were his books."

"The point is, Bonners are royalty," said Nicole.

Samson slapped the table. "The gnocchi," he bellowed. "I made them myself." He glared around, as if expecting dissent.

Paulette served the main course, which Douglas had to admit was delicious. He sipped his wine, and the conversation mellowed. Samson spoke of common concerns—the mayor, the weather, the stock market. Douglas listened. He complimented Samson on the gnocchi. When Samson asked about his Allentown boyhood, Douglas mentioned the Eagle Scout he'd been, but did not mention the chipmunks he had killed with firecrackers. Paulette asked Douglas about his favorite films, and Douglas answered. Every time Douglas looked at Nicole, she looked right back at him. All in all, Douglas was enjoying himself. The Chardonnay settled lightly in his head, and he found himself wondering random things, like how the Yankees would do this season, how cold it was outside, how curvy Nicole had ever emerged from beanstalk Paulette. The gnocchi plates were cleared.

"Well, girls," said Samson, "let's cut to the chase."

Paulette placed a snifter of brandy before each person.

"Which chase is that?" said Douglas, smiling. He wiped his mouth with his napkin.

"We feel that you should marry Nicole," said Samson.

Douglas sneezed four times in a row. Everyone blessed him.

"Pardon?" said Douglas.

"Paulette and I would like to arrange a marriage between you and our daughter here. Our only child."

Douglas stared at the Bonners. They were all seated in their chairs, smiling politely. Nicole wore the look that she always wore just before she aced a test. Nobody laughed.

"You're kidding," said Douglas.

"Oh, no." Samson Bonner sipped his brandy. "I'm not giving you the business, Doug."

Douglas got the boxing feeling in his stomach again. When he was young, he'd participated in the Friday Night Smokers, weekly events at the Society of Gentlemen club. The Gentlemen were hardworking Allentowners who drank whiskey and played cards on Friday nights. Every weekend, they brought in a crew of boys from area high schools. To earn themselves rib-eye steak dinners, the boys donned gloves and duked it out in a lighted canvas ring in the center of the club while the men drank and cheered. To be picked to box a Smoker was the highest honor an Allentown boy could receive, and Douglas had been chosen to fight fourteen times. He'd won twelve of those fights, one by a knockout, and he'd never had his nose broken. Some nights even now, just before he fell asleep, Douglas remembered himself in the ring, fighting Heather Angelona's brother Carmine. Carmine had ten pounds on him, and he was beating Douglas on points till the third round, when Douglas delivered an uppercut that jacked Carmine right off the ground and dropped him unconscious. The men in the room roared like lions. The bell clanged. Douglas remembered cigar smoke in his nose, blood on his face, and, strangely, no blood on Carmine's. Watching Mr. Angelona revive his son with smelling salts, Douglas had wanted simultaneously to vomit and to shove his tongue into Heather Angelona's mouth.

Douglas shook his head, cleared it. He stood up. "Nicole," he said severely. "What's going on? Is this some joke, some bizarre family hoax?"

"No." Nicole rested her fingertips calmly on the table. "My parents would honestly like you to marry me. So would I."

"Please sit down, Douglas," said Paulette.

For once, her tone had no levity. Douglas sat. "This is nuts," he said. "We're just having dinner."

Samson Bonner rapped the table with his knuckles. "Hell, son, Paulette and I have been happily married for twenty-five years, and guess what? My father set the whole thing up. He and Paulette's father were law partners."

"My maiden name is Depompis," explained Paulette.

"Right," said Samson. "Depompis. Anyway, our fathers saw that Paulette and I would stack up together. Well, we feel that you and Nicole stack up, too."

Douglas's head was swimming. "You've discussed this? As a family?"

"Sure," said Samson. "Every night for a week."

"Excuse me, Mr. . . . Excuse me, Samson, but you don't even know me."

"Oh, hell." Samson swatted the air as if it held gnats. "Nicole knows you. She says you watch a movie every night just like she reads a book every night."

"It's adorable," said Paulette.

Douglas stared at his student. She smiled quickly.

"Nicole," he said. "You're nineteen."

"Twenty in September," said Nicole.

"We held her back," said Paulette. "In third grade."

"Well, twenty, then," said Douglas.

"She struggled with phonics," said Paulette.

"Excuse me." Douglas cleared his throat loudly. The Bonners hushed themselves.

"Listen," said Douglas, "you've—I've—This has been a lovely meal, but—Well, aren't you all being quite preposterous? As I was trying to point out—"

"Young man," said Samson, "do you not find Nicole attractive?"

Douglas shut his mouth. He kept expecting a game-show host to spring out from behind a curtain. Nicole sat opposite him in her impossibly black dress, watching him with her relentless blue eyes. For the first time, Douglas honestly considered what it would be like if she were his. He thought of Lillian Marx, the last woman he'd dated, who'd adored jazz. He imagined holding Nicole's hand, driving with her to Montauk in a convertible, the radio playing the punk bands he knew she liked. He blushed.

"Religion's not an issue," blustered Samson. "Nicole assures me that you're High Episcopal, same as we are. She admires your intellect, and you always give her an A. So what's your problem, Doug?"

"Douglas," said Paulette. "We're really

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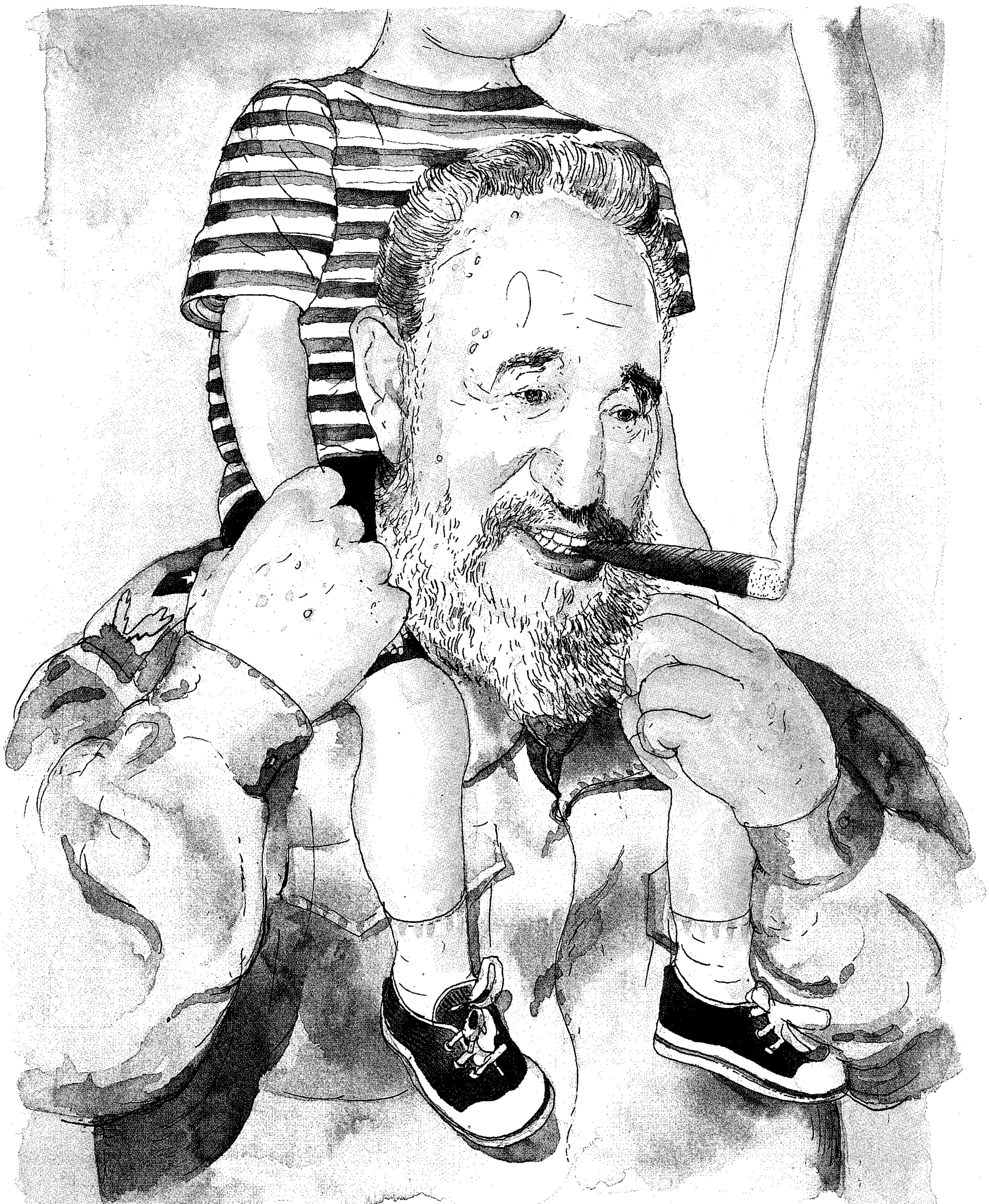
HAPPY FATHER'S DAY!



very impressed with you. Especially now that we've met."

Douglas sat up very straight. "Yes. Well. As I was trying to say, Nicole's eleven years younger than I am. Doesn't that seem . . . problematic?"

"No," said Samson. "I've got twelve years on Paulette."

"Mr. Kerchek," said Nicole. "Did you know, Mr. Kerchek, that in centuries past a girl was often married and birthing offspring by fourteen?"

"Let's not rush into any birthing," chuckled Samson.

"This isn't the Middle Ages, Nicole." Douglas swallowed some brandy after all. "You haven't even been to college."

"Well, I'm going, aren't I?"

"Of course she is." Paulette sounded offended. "No daughter of mine will be denied an education because of her husband."

"Now, hold on," said Douglas.

"Hey," growled Samson. "You can have my daughter's hand, Doug, and we'll give you some starting-out money, but Princeton's nonnegotiable. Don't try to weasel her out of that."

"I wasn't."

"No weaseling," said Nicole.

Douglas sighed heavily. "I need to use the bathroom," he said.

"Well, hell," said Samson. "Who wouldn't?"

Paulette pointed to a hallway. "Third door on the right."

Douglas strode quickly out of the room. His mind was a blur. He thought of his unserved, uneaten German cake. He recalled a teaching class he'd once taken, where the instructor had told him to watch out for female students and their crushes.

Is that what this is? thought Douglas. A crush?

The door to the bathroom was slightly ajar. Douglas was about to push it fully open when he heard a toilet flush from within.

"Excuse me," he said automatically. He stepped back, surprised. Moments later, the door nudged open and a black cat stepped out of the bathroom. It stopped at Douglas's feet and looked directly up at him.

"John Stapleton," whispered Douglas.

"*Mrow*," said John Stapleton.

The cat nibbled briefly at the toe of Douglas's left shoe, then proceeded down the hall, disappearing into the shadows.

This is insane, thought Douglas. This night, this family, this cat, all of them are certifiable. But the cat seemed like an omen, somehow, and as Douglas washed his face and hands in the bathroom sink, as he studied his goofy haircut and took deep, weight-lifting breaths to compose himself, he thought of Nicole. He thought of the simple silver-post earrings she always wore. He recalled the Melville she'd committed to memory, the respect she had for Graham Greene novels, the merciless grip she kept on her stick when she played field hockey. Her favorite film was "The Philadelphia Story," a tough favorite to argue against. He'd heard her rail passionately against the death penalty once during an ethics-class debate, and he'd seen her hold a faculty member's baby in her arms.

"I'd like to talk to Nicole alone," said Douglas, when he rejoined the Bonners.

"Of course you would," said Samson.

"Alone, alone." Paulette smiled wearily at Douglas.

"Use my study." Samson stood up, shook Douglas's hand.

They were alone. The study door was closed. Nicole sat on a daybed, her shoes off, her calves drawn together and to one side. Across the room, Douglas sat on the edge of a wooden chair, the top crossbar of which was embossed with a crest. Douglas thought that it might be the Bonner family crest, but he didn't ask.

Nicole cracked her knuckles. "In a minute, I'm going to start calling you Douglas instead of Mr. Kerchek."

"Oh, really?"

Nicole sighed. "Mr. Kerchek, please just listen. I'm going to say some things."

Douglas collected his thoughts. Outside the door was a married couple on a green couch, drinking brandy, perhaps petting John Stapleton. In the study with him was a headstrong young woman.

"Mr. Kerchek," said Nicole, "you know that I'm smart. That I can think and read well, the way you could when you were nineteen. But I also know what the world is like, Mr. Kerchek."

Douglas watched Nicole. She's serious, he thought. She's deadly serious.

"I know," said Nicole. "I know how long people go in this city without finding someone to love. I'm young, but I understand loneliness." Nicole rubbed her feet. "Listen. I know I can be irrational, Douglas."

Douglas caught his breath. He felt something in his spine—fear, maybe.

"Like tonight," said Nicole. "That 'King Lear' business. But here's something you probably don't know. I saw you at the Film Forum last week."

Douglas blushed again.

"They were showing 'The Gunfighter,' with Gregory Peck. It was last Tuesday, the 9 P.M. show. I saw it advertised in the paper, and I just knew you'd be there. So I went."

Douglas tried to remember what he'd worn that night, what candy he'd brought with him. A flannel shirt? Gummi Bears?

"I sat five rows behind you and watched your silhouette. I saw you admiring the guy who played the bartender. You know, the guy from 'On the Waterfront.'"

Douglas closed his eyes. She's right, he thought. She's nineteen and she's right.

"Anyway, whether you marry me or not, this is what I want to tell you." Nicole exhaled. "It's no good, Douglas."

Douglas kept his eyes closed. He was listening.

"It's no good the way you're living. All those weights you lift, all those miles you run, all those movies you see. It isn't right. It's lonely."

Douglas looked at her then. He saw her curves and her temples, but something else, too, something that lived behind her eyes.

"You're a good teacher and all, but you're just killing time, Douglas. I can tell."

Bullshit, thought Douglas. Then he thought, How? How am I killing it?

"I can tell from the books you assign, the ties you wear, everything." Nicole was not chewing her hair. "You're ready, Douglas. For *the* woman, the one you're supposed to marry." Nicole shrugged, just a little. "And I think she's me. I've dated some guys, and I know what's around, and— Well, I just know what I want."

"How?" blurted Douglas. His hands trembled on the snifter, so he put it down. He felt as if he might weep. "Are you in—" Douglas changed phrases. "Do you love me?"

Nicole petted her neck, sipped her brandy. "Look. I've got Princeton to go to. And I've got that huge heirloom library out there to read. I'm just saying that you should have a woman with you at the movies, and she should be me. I'm ready for her to be me."

Douglas couldn't sit still any longer. He stood up and paced. He wanted to shout or punch or be punched. He wanted something he knew the feeling of. He stalked over to Nicole, unsure of what to do.

"Easy, Douglas." Nicole moved back on the daybed.

"No." Douglas shook his head, went back to pacing. "No 'Easy, Douglas.' You have to tell me something here. I'm thirty-one, and I'm— I'm your *teacher*, for Christ's sake. I mean— Is this— Look, answer me, now, Nicole."

"O.K.," she whispered. "I will."

"Is this real? I mean, are you . . . in love with me?" He couldn't believe what he'd asked.

"I'm ready to be," said Nicole. "And I mean this as a compliment, but I've got nothing better to do."

Douglas stopped pacing. "I'm going crazy," he said softly. "'I'm standing here, solidly, on my own two feet, and I'm going crazy.'"

Nicole smiled. She took his hand.

"Listen," she said. "I have the prom in a month, which my cousin Fred is escorting me to, and graduation's two weeks after that. It'll be hectic for a bit, but as of the first week of June I'm prepared to become completely infatuated with you."

Douglas laughed out loud, once, at the practicality in her voice. He thought of his mother, of Chiapas and the Mexicans, of the unbroken chain of essays that he'd corrected for the past six years. There might have been a thousand of those essays. And there might have been a time in history when all people spoke like Nicole Bonner.

"I can commute to Princeton," explained Nicole, "or else just come back to you on weekends. My family's a little eccentric, and I am, too, but, well, there it is. What do you think?"

"I never should have tried to take my accounting to the next level."

• •

Douglas pulled Nicole to her feet. He felt giddy, vicious. He didn't know what he felt. Like an animal, he set his teeth for one last stand.

"Nicole." His voice was low, almost mean. "If you're kidding about all this, and you tell me tomorrow that you're kidding, then I'll . . . I'll . . ." Douglas clenched and unclenched his fists.

"I'm not kidding," said Nicole.

Douglas looked out the window at New York City. He looked back at Nicole.

"You're sure?"

Nicole reached up, trailed one hand lightly over Douglas's haircut.

"Domestic shorthair," she whispered.

Douglas took both her hands in his. He was beaming. He felt slightly nauseous. "All right. All right, if you're serious, then I want you to do something for me."

Nicole frowned. "No sex till we're hitched. A kiss, maybe."

"Be quiet and listen." Douglas's voice quavered with pleasure. "I don't want you to kiss me. I want you to hit me."

"What?"

Douglas couldn't keep the grin, the old, triumphant sass, off his face.

"I want you to punch me in the stomach as hard as you can."

Nicole stepped away. "You're insane."

"No." Douglas took her by the shoulders, squared her off facing him. "Trust me. If you do this, I'll know that we're— I'll just know."

Nicole laughed, just a little. "You're a freak."

"Hit me."

Nicole angled her head to one side. "You're serious."

"Give me your hand."

Nicole held out her right palm.

"Make a fist. No, like this, with your thumb outside. Good."

"How do you know how—"

"Shut up and hit me." Douglas sneered at her. "Come on. Let's see what you got."

A wicked joy stole over Nicole's face. "You better watch it."

"Hit me."

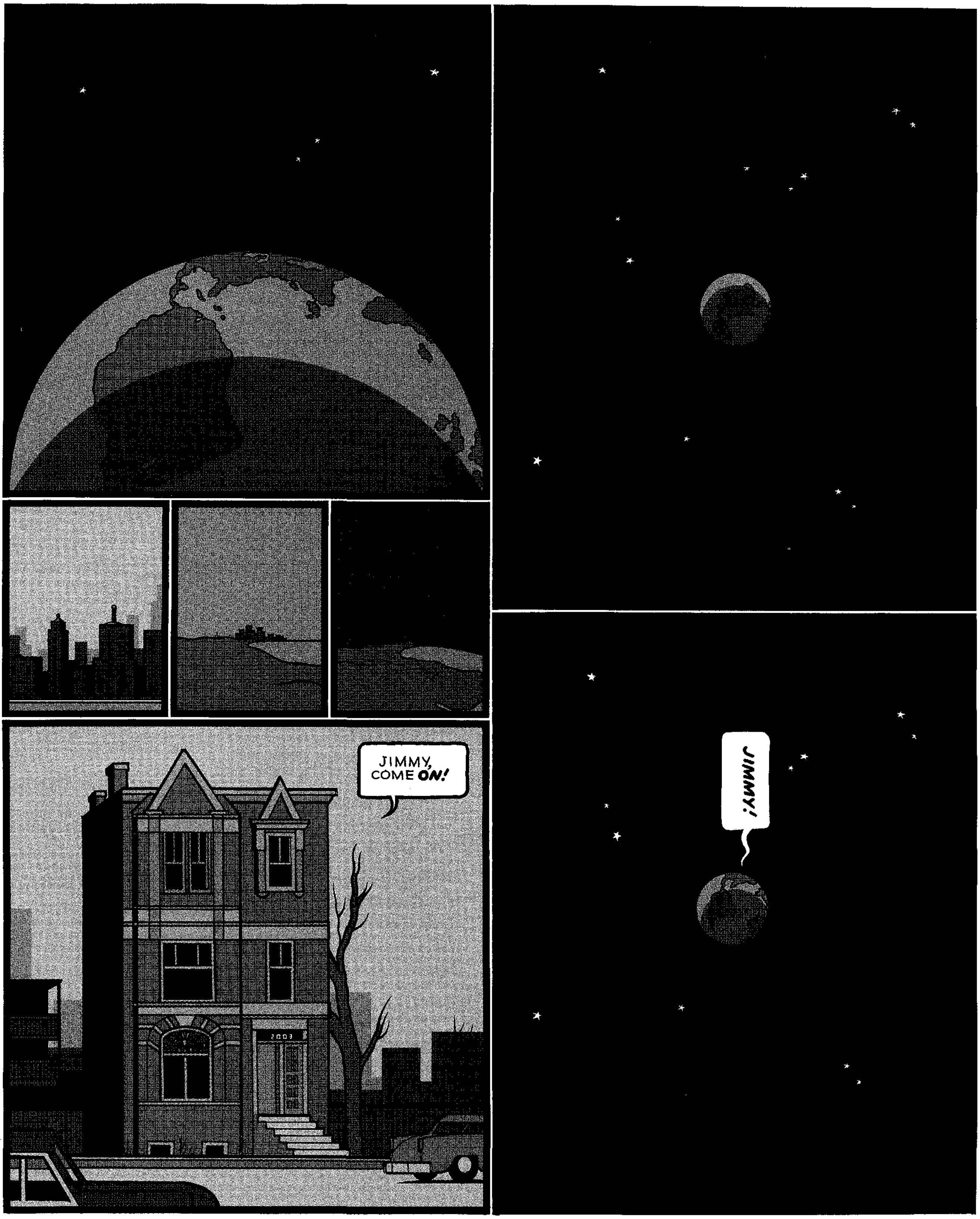
"I'll do it, Douglas," she warned.

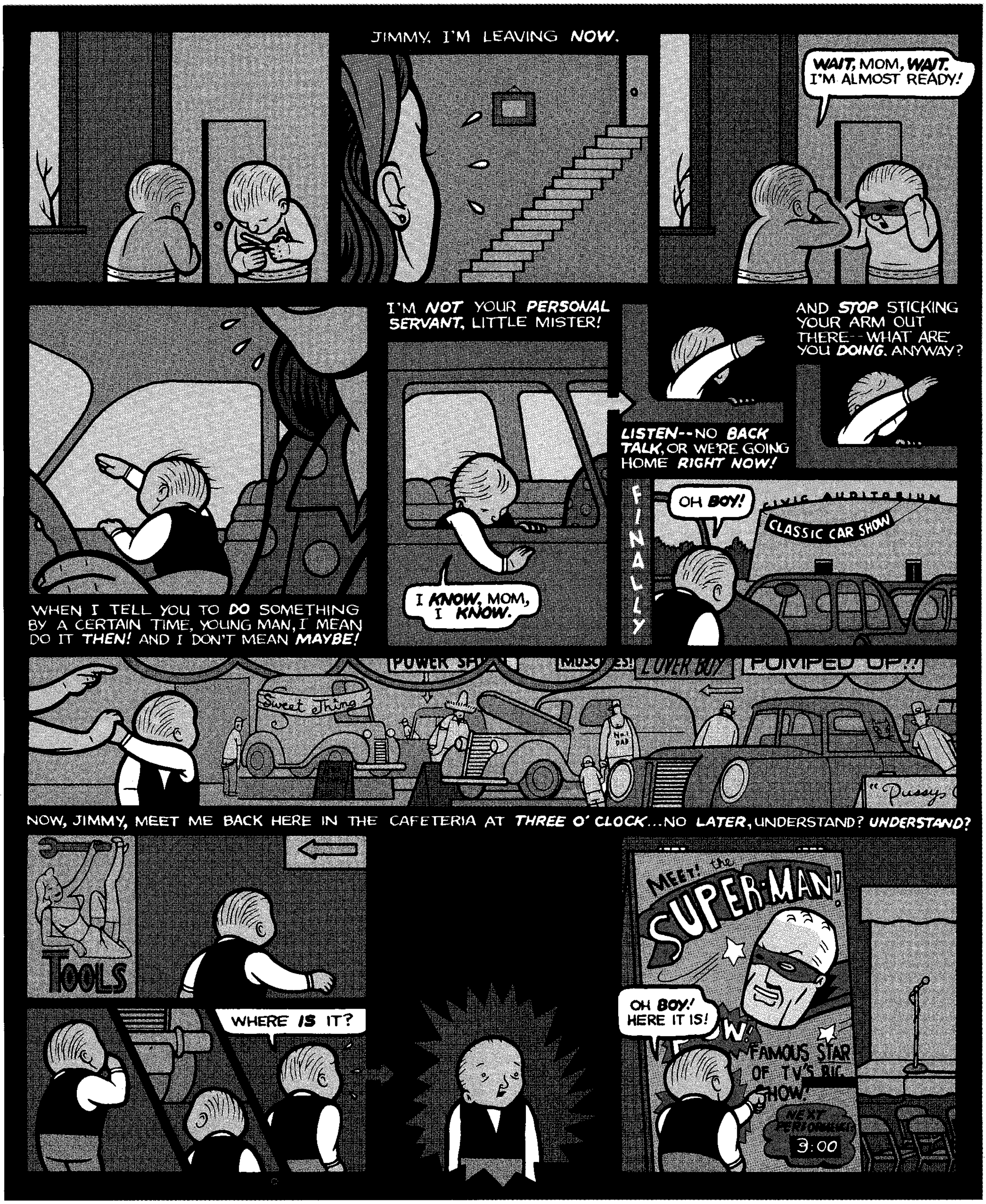
"Go ahead."

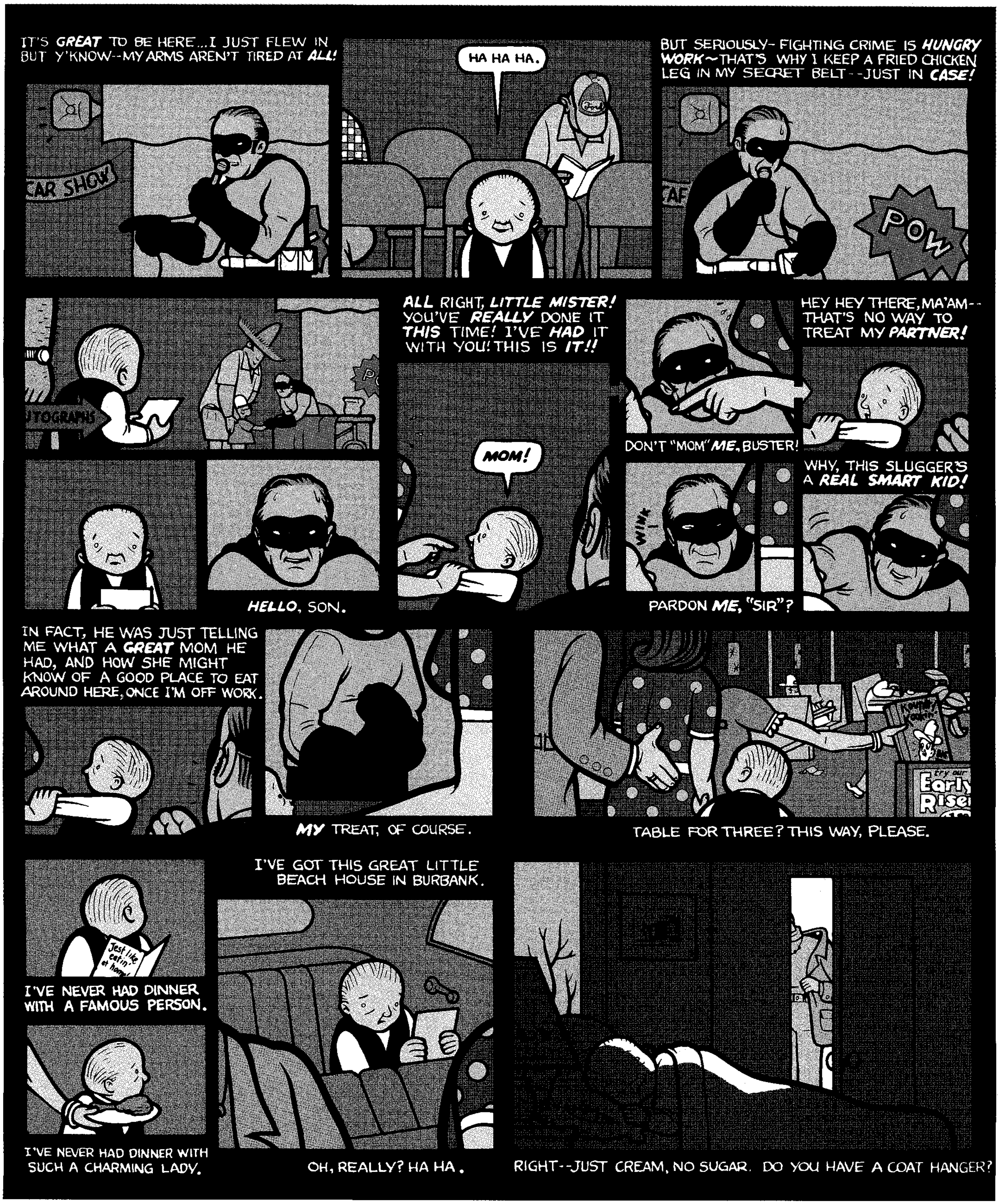
Nicole drew her fist back to her hip. Her eyes checked the door that was hiding her parents. She looked to Douglas as if she would erupt with laughter, or something else, something he couldn't predict.

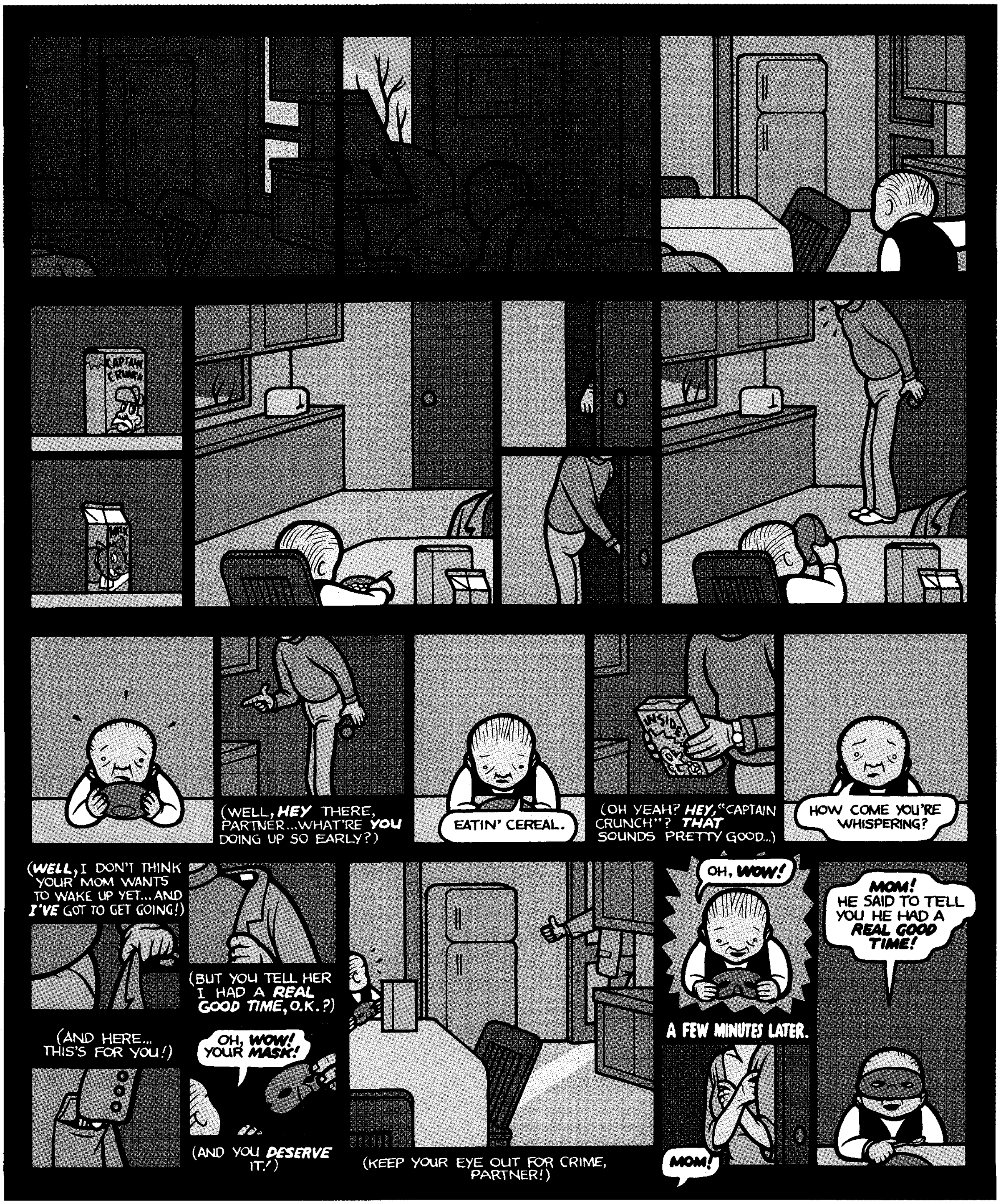
"Come on, punk." Douglas dared her, and that was it. Nicole shot her fist forward and showed him what he, what both of them, were in for. ♦

JIMMY CORRIGAN THE SMARTEST KID ON EARTH.


JIMMY, COME ON!
2003
JIMMY!


JIMMY, I'M LEAVING NOW.
WAIT, MOM, WAIT. I'M ALMOST READY!
I'M NOT YOUR PERSONAL SERVANT, LITTLE MISTER!
AND STOP STICKING YOUR ARM OUT THERE--WHAT ARE YOU DOING, ANYWAY?
LISTEN--NO BACK TALK, OR WE'RE GOING HOME RIGHT NOW!
WHEN I TELL YOU TO DO SOMETHING BY A CERTAIN TIME, YOUNG MAN, I MEAN DO IT THEN! AND I DON'T MEAN MAYBE!
I KNOW, MOM, I KNOW.
FINALLY
OH BOY!
CIVIC AUDITORIUM
CLASSIC CAR SHOW
LOVER BOY
PUMPED UP?!
Sweet Thing
No. 1 DAD
NOW, JIMMY, MEET ME BACK HERE IN THE CAFETERIA AT THREE O' CLOCK...NO LATER, UNDERSTAND? UNDERSTAND?
TOOLS
WHERE IS IT?
MEET! the SUPER-MAN!
OH BOY! HERE IT IS!
FAMOUS STAR OF TV'S BIG SHOW!
NEXT PERFORMANCE
3:00


IT'S GREAT TO BE HERE...I JUST FLEW IN BUT Y'KNOW--MY ARMS AREN'T TIRED AT ALL!
CAR SHOW
HA HA HA.
BUT SERIOUSLY- FIGHTING CRIME IS HUNGRY WORK~THAT'S WHY I KEEP A FRIED CHICKEN LEG IN MY SECRET BELT--JUST IN CASE!
POW
UTOGRAPHS
HELLO, SON.
ALL RIGHT, LITTLE MISTER! YOU'VE REALLY DONE IT THIS TIME! I'VE HAD IT WITH YOU! THIS IS IT!!
MOM!
DON'T "MOM" ME, BUSTER!
HEY HEY THERE, MA'AM--THAT'S NO WAY TO TREAT MY PARTNER!
WINK
PARDON ME, "SIR"?
WHY, THIS SLUGGER'S A REAL SMART KID!
IN FACT, HE WAS JUST TELLING ME WHAT A GREAT MOM HE HAD, AND HOW SHE MIGHT KNOW OF A GOOD PLACE TO EAT AROUND HERE, ONCE I'M OFF WORK.
MY TREAT, OF COURSE.
Try our Early Riser
TABLE FOR THREE? THIS WAY, PLEASE.
Just like eatin' at home!
I'VE NEVER HAD DINNER WITH A FAMOUS PERSON.
I'VE NEVER HAD DINNER WITH SUCH A CHARMING LADY.
I'VE GOT THIS GREAT LITTLE BEACH HOUSE IN BURBANK.
OH, REALLY? HA HA.
RIGHT--JUST CREAM, NO SUGAR. DO YOU HAVE A COAT HANGER?


CAPTAIN CRUNCH
(WELL, HEY THERE, PARTNER...WHAT'RE YOU DOING UP SO EARLY?)
EATIN' CEREAL.
INSIDE!
(OH YEAH? HEY, "CAPTAIN CRUNCH"? THAT SOUNDS PRETTY GOOD...)
HOW COME YOU'RE WHISPERING?
(WELL, I DON'T THINK YOUR MOM WANTS TO WAKE UP YET... AND I'VE GOT TO GET GOING!)
(BUT YOU TELL HER I HAD A REAL GOOD TIME, O.K.?)
(AND HERE... THIS'S FOR YOU!)
OH, WOW! YOUR MASK!
(AND YOU DESERVE IT!)
(KEEP YOUR EYE OUT FOR CRIME, PARTNER!)
OH, WOW!
A FEW MINUTES LATER.
MOM!
MOM! HE SAID TO TELL YOU HE HAD A REAL GOOD TIME!

FICTION

PROSPERITY

BY AKHIL SHARMA

Before Independence and the Five-Year Plans brought roads and electricity, Beri was a village of a hundred mostly Brahman families living in one-room mud homes scattered over several small hills. There were no shops, and we had to rely on the entrepreneurs who went regularly to the neighboring town and brought back everything from rose oil to needles.

My father, a farmer, was the village teacher, a man so virtuous that even when he was drunk people continued to speak to him with respect. I had two older brothers, who were then exactly as they are now—inward, always plotting, ready to hate. My mother was the only person I loved, and I think she loved only me; she used to take the peas out of my brothers' food and put them in mine. She was short and fat and always walked around barefoot, like a child. Whenever we waited by the side of the road for a bus, I would tell her to move back, because this was one of the few ways I was able to show my love for her.

When I was very young, she started seeing ghosts in the dark corners of our house and would sometimes claim to be a princess who had taken poison to protect her honor. Several times she buried our plates and pots in different parts of the farm. When she went crazy like this, we would tie her hands and feet to a cot or to the millstone. One moonless summer night, after we had bound her, she escaped, and my father, my brothers, and I had to chase her till dawn over Beri's hills. Her high, giddy laughter was like smoke filling the night.

Though I was lonely as a child, I was also aggressive and talkative. When we played children's games, I was always the captain of a team, and I had a gang of five or six boys who referred to me respectfully as "Grandfather." Together we terrorized the other children, making them run useless errands, such as going to a particular tree and bringing back a specific leaf. If a boy refused to do this, I beat him.

No adult minded these small incidents. Violence was common in our village. Grown men used to rub kerosene on a bitch's nipples and watch the dog bite herself to death, or they would lash the tails of two cats together with a cord and bet on which cat would kill the other first. The father of a friend of mine clubbed his wife over the head with a piece of wood. Her speech became slurred and she started having fits. But even the village women, her friends, treated what had happened to her as an impersonal misfortune, like a badly set bone that warps as it heals. The things that might mark me as unusual, or explain what I later did to my daughter Anita, were present in many other people in our village.

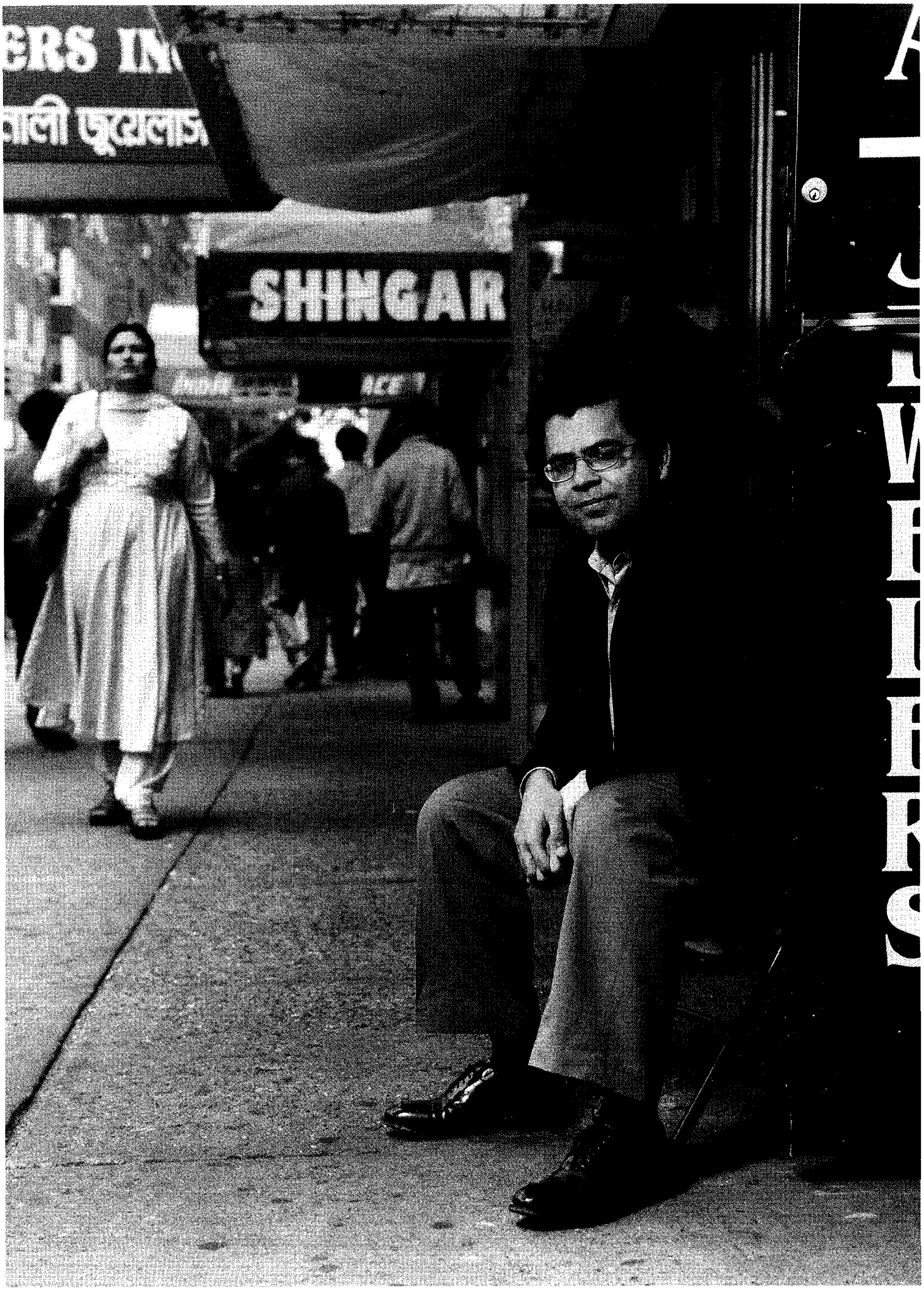
The country's partition into Muslim Pakistan and Hindu India was only a month away when the first corpse showed up in an alley, curled on its side in the shade of a mud wall. It was late afternoon. Classes were over for the day, and I was going home when I saw it. Alcoholism was common, and at first I thought the man had passed out from drink. I walked up to him to get a better look. He had one arm tucked under his head, and one of his legs stretched out from a shadow on the ground, as if to trip me. From a few metres away, I noticed a Muslim's skullcap lying in the dust. This surprised me—none of the dozen or so Muslim families in the town touched alcohol. Then I understood that the darkness on the ground was blood.

During the following week, Muslim corpses began appearing everywhere. Next to a thorn fence at Beri's edge, I found a young woman and a boy of about eight. Both were naked and had numerous knife wounds. One of the blows had parted the skin and meat on the boy's shoulder, and I could see white, clean bone beneath. The corpse of the old man who ran the town's general store showed up on our neighbors' property. Although every Hindu in town knew about the murders, we didn't discuss them, and this silence became intolerable, like holding one's breath until one's lungs ache. We woke each morning feeling that getting through the day at hand was a hopeless task. A teacher cried in class for two days, and the principal scolded him in front of us. Not a Muslim in our town survived. Our school was shut down because parents were afraid to let their children out of sight.

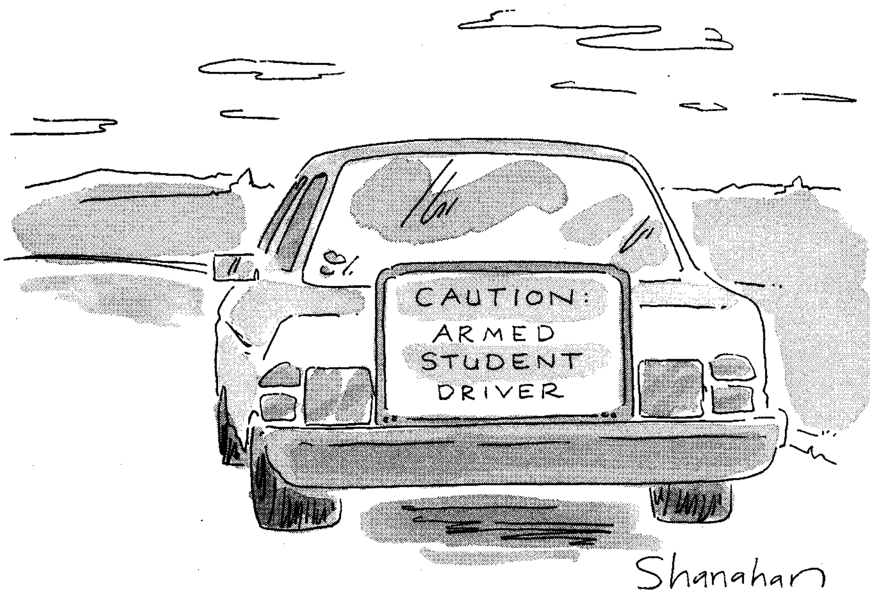
Soon afterward, my mother got pneumonia. She had been sick for several weeks with a cough that lifted her upright with each violent exhalation and had broken two of her ribs.

On the night that she died, I had gone to a neighboring farm to buy some biscuits, which she had asked for. The sky was bright even though the sun had set, and a bit of the moon was showing. In the air, there was the dry, almost sweet smell of dung burning. Every time I was away from her for more than ten minutes, I wondered if she had died. Since the week of the corpses, my mind had fixed on the idea that God was going to punish me. I wasn't sure whether it would be for having seen the corpses or for not having done anything to help the Muslims, but my imagination conjured up terrible things: I might lose my sight; my father and brothers might drink poisonous water; Ma might die.

When I reached our yard, I heard women crying inside the house and


ERS IN
ाली ज्वेलार्स
SHINGAR
A
J
WELERS

Akhil Sharma in Jackson Heights, Queens. He moved to the United States from India in 1979. Photograph by Andrea Artz.



knew immediately that my mother was dead. But I did not really believe it until I saw the village women crouched around her on the floor. I gasped, and then I started doing the things that must be done when someone dies. I brought the jeweller over, and he pried the stud out of my mother's nose with tweezers and clipped the silver ring off her toe. I helped to carry my mother to the crematorium. None of this made me cry at the time, not even the foul smell of her hair and flesh burning, or the way her body twitched in the flames when the muscles contracted, or collecting her ashes afterward to pour into the Ganges. Everything caused my grief to burrow inward.

But for months after Ma's death I would wake at sunrise and begin to cry. The more I cried, the more I needed to cry. The first tears of the day would be from sorrow and despair, but these excavated an even greater anguish. I felt that by imagining my mother's death I had incited God to kill her. In my head I kept hearing the bang of my mother's stomach exploding in the funeral pyre and seeing my father as he shattered her skull with a staff. My brothers grew tired of my weeping. "Go cry in the fields and scare away the crows with your noise," one said. Their indifference to our mother's death (neither had wept) made me think sometimes that I was the one good person in the world. I would walk sobbing through the fields and hills until I passed into hysteria. Then, exhausted, I would lie down wherever I was, next to a well, in the middle of some farmer's crops, and sleep.

When I was twenty years old, I joined the Navy. We were at war with Pakistan, and I wanted to fight for my country. Compared with farm work, my three years in the Navy were like a long holiday. A farm is yours, and you are always worried about it; the Navy was just work—locks had to be greased regularly, machinery carefully examined and repaired. In return for doing this, I got to see the ocean for the first time. I visited cities where people spoke strange languages. And leaving Punjab freed me from the sadness I had felt for the last year and a half.

In Bombay, I slept with a child for the first time. There was so little shame about prostitution in the Navy that sailors were charged less at brothels than all but the most frequent customers. At that point, I was not actually interested in children, but when an acquaintance told me about a thirteen-year-old prostitute I felt excited in a way I had not since I'd had sex with a vastly pregnant whore several months earlier. I went looking for the girl the evening I heard of her.

The red-light district of Bombay took up several blocks along a narrow road. The street was crowded and noisy with voices and radios. There were no street lights, and the only illumination came from windows and doors. The brothels were old two- and three-story houses, and most did not have numbers written out front. People kept bumping into me as I looked for the right house, and I patted my breast pocket to make sure that my wallet was still there.

When I found the brothel, a fat woman with an enormous *bindi* painted on her forehead was sitting sidewise on a bicycle in front of a narrow door. I asked her if she had a "young girl" because I could not say "child."

She immediately said, "Twenty rupees."

I was so shocked by the price that I thought the woman had misunderstood me. "I don't want a virgin," I said.

The woman eyed me. "For twenty rupees, you get firewood, not a forest." When I did not respond, she added, "You'll get your own room and can enjoy yourself with respect." I gave her the money, and she tied it inside a handkerchief and tucked this between her breasts.

Usually I became hard as soon as I stepped inside a brothel, but as I followed the woman up a dimly lit stairway and down a narrow hall I stayed soft. The wall facing the street had several small waist-high windows, and we could hear the voices of people outside. I wondered whether I would actually have sex with the girl. I believed that if she truly looked young something would stop me at the last moment.

The fat woman took me to a small blue room. The girl was sitting on a cot reading a comic book, and when we entered she looked up at me. She had an oval face, a broad hooked nose, and bulging eyes, which, because she blinked only rarely, gave her an unchanging, startled expression. Her legs were no thicker than her arms, and her breasts were just beginning to grow. She looked tiny in her pale-green shalwar kameez, and I felt the enormity of her helplessness; I had not realized that thirteen was so young. "Half an hour," the woman said as she left the room. She did not close the door, but drew a curtain across the doorway.

The girl continued to stare at me. I sat down beside her. I told myself that I should leave, that twenty rupees was not so much money, that maybe the woman would let me have another prostitute instead. "What's your name?" I asked. She did not answer. I wondered if she was drugged.

"Chandni," she said suddenly, as if I had only just asked my question.

Prostitutes often took false names when they joined the trade, using the name of a flower or a precious stone, and I felt rebuffed by the name she had given me, which meant "moonlight."

"Is that your real name?"

"Stop asking questions," she said.

The girl stood abruptly, pulled her shirt over her head, and untied her pants. Her pubic hair was sparse. Her waist was no wider than my thigh. She looked almost sexless. I was still not hard. I gathered a breast in one hand. I was astounded by its softness. It was like water. I kissed her nipples and laid her on the bed. Her nipples had wide aureoles and, like her eyes, appeared astonished. As I took off my clothes, the girl spat into her hands and rubbed the spit into her vagina. This disgusted and excited me simultaneously.

"How long have you been doing this?"

"For twenty rupees, you only get to fuck."

My embarrassment made me protest, "Twenty rupees is a lot of money."

She grimaced, as if she were disgusted by my poverty. "All you get is fucking."

Sex with her was not different from sex with an older woman, except that her vagina was shallower.

"Do you like this?" I asked when I was inside her. I often asked this.

"No," she said, and then a little later added, "I hate men like you, sweating and talking, talking. Wanting things for free."

As I rode a rickshaw back to the ship, I felt afraid of myself, and of what else I might be capable of doing. I swore out loud, "I will never go to a whore again. For the next three months, I will give a tenth of my salary to charity." But there was no solace in these words. Memories of my mother began coming to me—the way she had always walked around barefoot, her sweet tooth, how I had moved my cot next to hers when she was dying. Only then, at the thought that I had been loved once, did the full force of shame and responsibility well up in me. Who would love me now?

Even years later, while masturbating, I occasionally returned to the memory of the girl rubbing spit into her vagina. But I never again went to a child prostitute.

I left the Navy when I was twenty-three, and I took a job as a physical-education teacher at a boys' school in Delhi. Teaching exercise did not take much time or effort, and I spent most of my days drinking tea in the teachers' room. Five months after I had started my new job, I married Radha.

Radha was nineteen. She was thin, with slightly jutting teeth that forced her mouth open and brittle hair that wouldn't grow past her shoulders no matter how well she cared for it. But she soon became beautiful to me. She had an attentive, serious quality that I found attractive, and despite everything I had done in the Navy, I believed that I would be a faithful husband.

We spent the first week of our marriage in Beri. Radha had brought a bag of toffees to hand out to the children of all her new relatives. I asked her if her

"I've been hearing nothing but good things about you."

mother had suggested this as a way to charm her in-laws.

"No," she said and then paused. It was a hot summer night. Radha was sitting on our cot, looking away as I undressed. We had not made love yet. "When I was a child, a neighbor got married and his wife gave out candies. I thought she was smart."

"You're smart, too," I said. I felt grateful to be with someone intelligent, because it meant that she could take care of me.

"Not smart. I am understanding," Radha said, and fell silent, as if she had revealed too much.

Getting Radha to tell me a joke was as thrilling as teaching a wild rabbit to lick sugar from my palm. And the ritual of furnishing our future together—purchasing bedsheets and stainless-steel pots—and of coming home from work with some gift for Radha, mangoes or biscuits, was a way of erasing the silliness of a day spent supervising children doing jumping jacks. Once, early on, I saw Radha with her fingertips wrinkled from bathing, and I felt lucky at the prospect of being able to age with her.

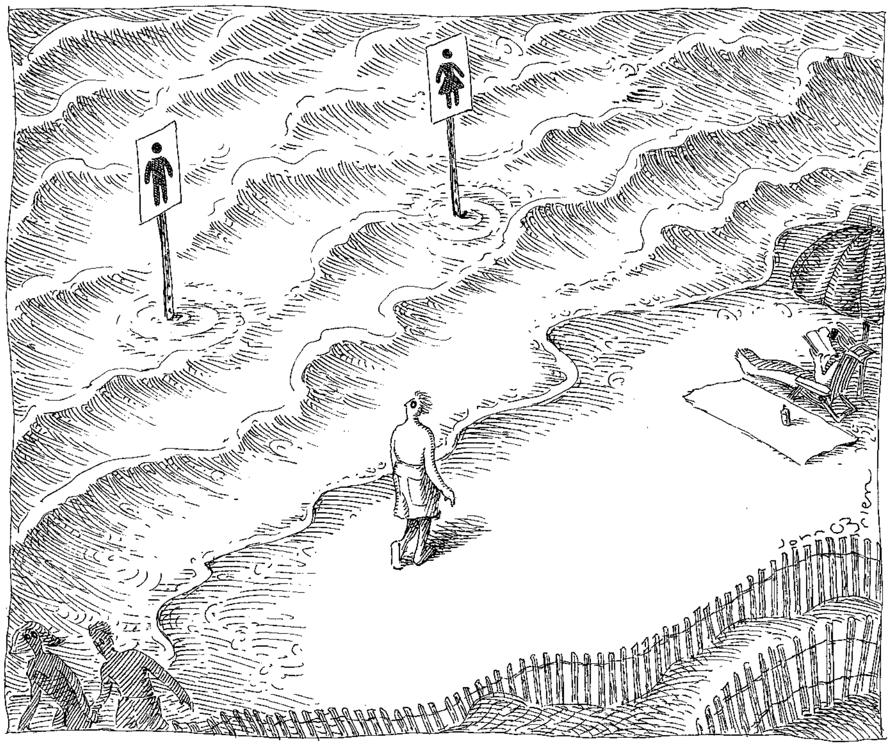
Later, Radha would say that even at the beginning of our life together I took advantage of her pliability and innocence. She pointed to how I had always expected her to be ready with food when I returned home late after drinking with friends. She mentioned our annual summer trip to see my family in Beri. Village life is especially hard on women, and Radha didn't like to leave Old Delhi, but she felt obligated to come with me. During those trips she was tormented by my sisters-in-law, perhaps because they thought that I might claim some of the land they wanted their husbands to inherit. They hid the laundry soap and gave her the hardest work, so that she spent the whole day running to the well or collecting firewood and cow dung to burn. She could not get used to the water and was often sick.

"Your book stinks—we want to publish it."

But these examples do not actually illustrate what Radha meant when she said I took advantage of her. After all, in the beginning of our marriage she was mostly happy. I think she meant that I should have known then that my love would not last. I misled her, she believed, by treating her as if she were my heart walking unprotected in the world. Despite her demureness and traditional values, Radha had a practical intelligence, and when I fantasized out loud that I could someday run for political office she looked at me with such dismay that I grew angry and withdrew from her. Our love wore out after three years, I think. Radha believed that it ended with Baby's death. For a long time, I accepted this explanation, but now I think that her hidden romantic streak kept her from admitting that our love simply got used up.

Baby was born in February, 1955, and died four months later of a water sickness. I was in Beri, and Radha was in Delhi, because she thought she could take better care of him there. When he fell ill, Radha sent me telegrams asking me to come home. She told me that he had a fever which had made him wrinkled and dry, that there was blood in his stool, that he no longer cried. But I thought she was exaggerating as a way to punish me for leaving her alone in Delhi. After the fourth telegram, angry at the money she was wasting, I stopped responding, and when Baby died Radha did not send a message.

The evening I returned to Delhi, Radha told me that she herself had put the torch to Baby's funeral pyre. I sat on a cot in our single narrow room as she described the cremation: the pyre the size of a bush, the kindness of the pandit, the scolding her family had given her for going to a crematorium, which women are forbidden to do. She stood stiffly before me with her arms hanging straight down beside her. She looked like a student giving a presentation. The room opened directly onto a busy road, and the noise of the evening traffic was so loud that Radha's words got lost among the car horns and the shouts of people on the street. After she stopped talking, she stood and watched me cry. Then she went and made dinner. Night came. Traffic trailed off. When the food was ready, she came to me and said, "Don't bother, even though you cry such handsome tears."



For months after Baby died, Radha wept everywhere, while she was doing the laundry or cooking dinner, and this reminded me of myself after my mother's death. I began drinking. Until then, I had drunk only with friends. Now, once or twice a week, I went to a saloon and sat in the back with a litre of beer and some fried peanuts. When I first started drinking by myself, I would weep loudly, hoping to attract attention. After a young waiter there whispered in my ear, "Shut up, Fatso," I began holding my tears till I got home. When I returned to the flat and Radha became angry at my drunkenness, I would shout, "Do you think you're the only one with a heart?"

Radha lost interest in me and my foolishness, and I avoided her. She found a guru and began to pray three times a day. I started visiting prostitutes again. Radha and I slept in separate rooms, and I went to her only when I hadn't had time to stop at the brothels and when my lust was nagging at me so much that I could not sleep. Still, Anita was born a year after Baby died. Our daughter Kusum followed two years later. I remember how Radha stared up at me expressionlessly as I struggled to climax; sometimes this made me impotent, but at other times I actually became even more aroused. When our son, Rajesh, was born two years later, she clenched her teeth so tightly that they shifted and splayed out even further. By the time Radha was thirty, she had stopped oiling her hair and changing her clothes regularly, and she became, like my children, only a reminder of all the things I had done wrong.

I was indifferent toward the children, and I justified this by saying that at least I took good care of them. Seven years earlier, I had moved up and found a place in school administration, and I could nearly double my monthly salary by accepting bribes to arrange the admission of children into particular schools. My family did not live well, but we drank milk each day. And the tremors of remorse I felt for going to prostitutes were so slight that I brushed them aside like cobwebs.

The years passed. My father died and Nehru died, and I cried for both, surprising myself with the earnestness of my tears. India fought Pakistan, China, Pakistan. I used some of my new wealth to start a small restaurant, but there was little money in it and my workers cheated me. I bought two rickshaws with a cousin and leased them out. I did this until my cousin was stabbed in the throat by a driver over a dispute involving forty rupees. We moved every few years, though never out of Old Delhi and never more than two bus stops from where we had last lived.

Anita, Kusum, and Rajesh grew into odd children who played only with one another and who were so quiet that strangers at first thought they were slightly retarded. Even when no one was around, they spoke softly. When I heard them murmuring, I often wondered whether they were speaking of me.

You jiggle the years in your pocket thinking you are rich, and suddenly you have spent everything. I was thirty-eight and an old man overnight, and Anita was twelve and so young that seeing her was like looking down into a dark misty valley in the early morning and wondering what will be revealed when the sun arrives.

One afternoon, Anita fell asleep beside me while we were listening to the radio. Indira Gandhi had just become Prime Minister. The room was dark, and the quilt that covered us was heavy and warm. I was dozing off as well. In her sleep, Anita rolled over and her hand fell on my penis. I woke immediately and started to take her hand away, but there was something mysteriously erotic about lying beneath the warm quilt with Anita's light touch, listening to her breathe and feeling her weight against my side. I became hard. After a few minutes, Anita rolled once more and removed her hand.

Later that day, I told myself that I hadn't removed her hand because I'd been slightly dazed from sleep. I do not remember whether I had seen Anita in a sexual light before this. I probably had, because I used to wonder what it would be like to have sex with nearly everyone, even the children I saw in the schools I visited. But I am sure that before that afternoon she had held no special attraction in my eyes. Anita was not a pretty girl. Her curly hair was dry and short, like her mother's, and she had a round thick face and a large nose. But her unattractive qualities actually emboldened me in what was to come, because they meant that I would not get carried away by pleasure.

One afternoon, a day or two later, I played a game of tag with her in the courtyard of our house. We laughed and bounced about. But as I swayed in front of her I kept positioning myself so that her hand might brush my crotch as she lunged toward me. In one of her dives she finally pressed her open hand against my penis. I felt such a shock of pleasure that I stopped moving. The mineral flavor of lust filled my mouth. Anita also stopped. She looked frightened. I immediately realized that if I let Anita associate anything bad with touching me she would not do it again, so I laughed. Our game continued for a little while after that. Then I went off to my room and masturbated.

The pleasure and relief of masturbation were so strong that I knew right away that I would repeat this game. My conscience did not bother me. Because the game provided a cover for my intentions, I reasoned that I was not damaging Anita physically or emotionally, and I felt no need to set limits on where my hands might go or where I might lead hers. Nor did I wonder when the games might end. They would continue till they came to some quiet and natural conclusion, and then the passing of the years would cover up whatever memories Anita had of them.

We usually played these games on the roof of the house after I returned from work. The sky might be sliding between shades of purple, and the nearby roofs were always crowded. Sometimes people watched us play: Anita trying to tag me, and me hopping, swaying, shouting challenges, just out of reach. We played until we were out of breath. Then, because I insisted, we stood a foot or so apart, trying to pat each other and then jump away before being tagged back. Occasionally, Kusum, Rajesh, and Radha came upstairs and read or talked or played games, pausing every now and then to watch us. I was so confident of the game's disguise that in front of all these people I touched Anita's thighs, the backs of her legs, and sometimes, though rarely, her chest.

The games gradually became more involved. If Radha and the other children were downstairs, Anita and I would begin on the open roof and then move into the roof's storage shed, the door closing behind us as if on its own. On one occasion, after we moved into the shed and were standing less than a foot apart, tagging each other with our fingertips to try to make the other person "it," I pretended to reach for Anita's chin and dropped my hand under her skirt to her crotch. Her underwear was damp with sweat. The surge of excitement was so great that instead of touching her and removing my hand I stopped and held her. Anita stared into my stomach, and I looked at the thin rectangle of light surrounding the closed door of the shed. For years after that, anything moist—a bathroom doorknob covered in steam—made me remember the feeling of her underwear, almost soaked through, and the smooth boniness beneath.

Weeks became months, and we spent less and less time on the roof before moving into the shed. After a few minutes of tag, I would push Anita into the shed by getting behind her and bumping her back with my crotch. Once we were hidden from the neighbors' eyes, Anita would put her hand on my penis without prompting. Sometimes she even stroked me through my pants. I would not look at her directly. I placed my hand between her legs and gripped her.

To win Anita's love, I bought her comic books and taught her magic tricks. To distract others from the oddity of a grown man playing these children's games with such intensity, I tried to win over the rest of the family, too, taking everyone to dinner and a film once a week. We were all happier than we'd ever been. A stranger would have been charmed by the ease with which we bantered, the contests of joke-telling and singing. Radha, who had withdrawn into religion, began to involve herself again in the children's lives and in our plans as a family. She had a beautiful voice and sang to us nearly every night.

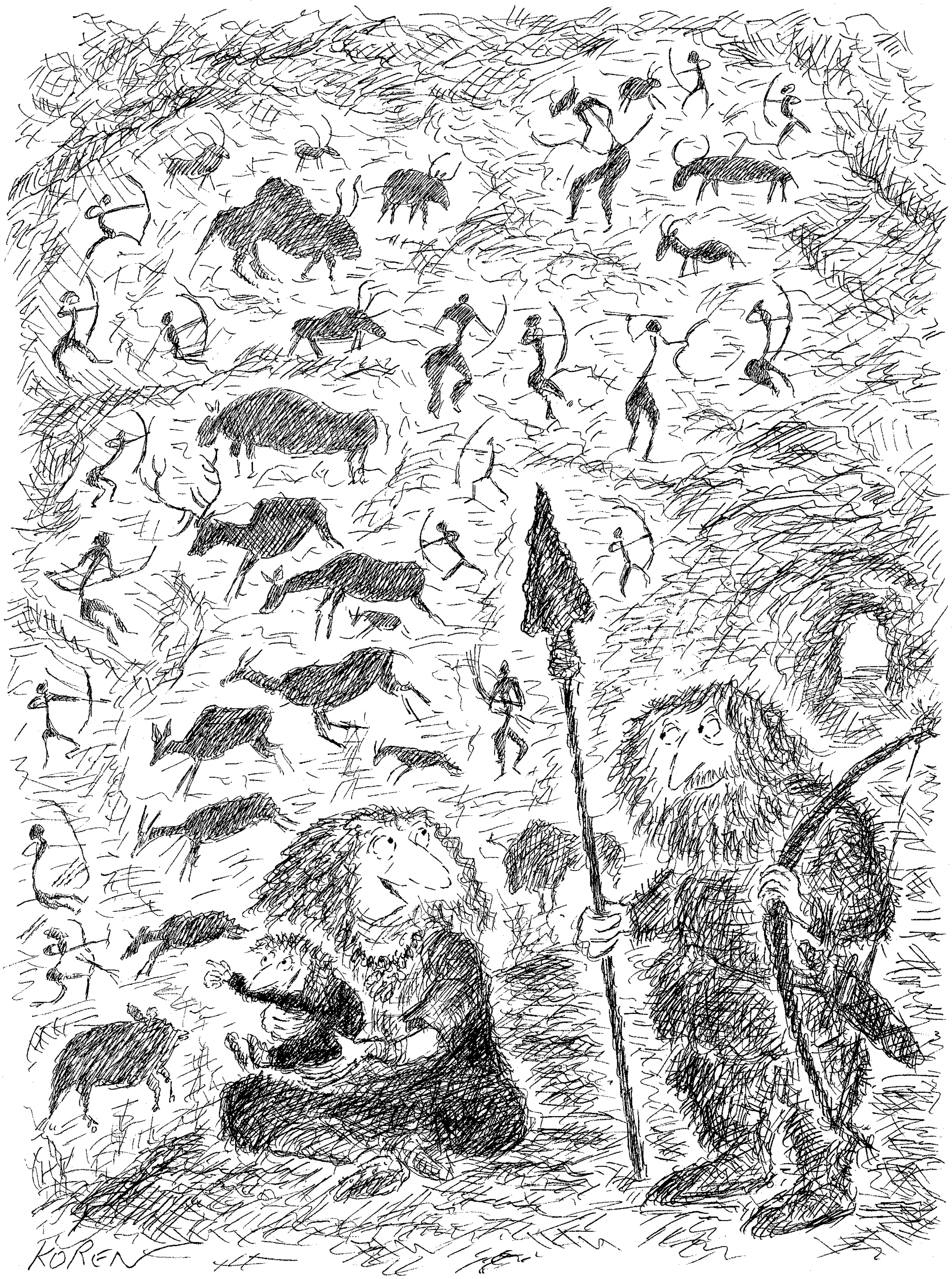
But there was fear in the air, like the agitation before a storm. In the beginning, I'd felt no shame for what I was doing, but as time passed and the touching became more and more obvious I began to have dreams of humiliation, of people catching me with Anita. One morning, on my way to work, I saw a pickpocket being beaten by four or five people at a bus stop. He was lying in the gutter, his arms wrapped around his head, while they kicked. All day this scene returned to me, and my arms kept lifting on their own to cover my head. This stopped my games with Anita for several days.

If Anita had seemed harmed by what I was doing, our games might have ended sooner. Instead she appeared increasingly cheerful and outgoing. She showed signs of spirit—talking back and arguing with her mother, and no longer hiding when strangers came to the house. A teacher remarked that she was showing more interest in her schoolwork. I taught her the basics of palm reading, and she offered to read our guests' palms one night. Radha's and my neglect must have stunted her to such an extent that even my tainted attention had a positive effect.

I have no doubt that Anita loved me during this time. When I got home from work, she immediately took away my shoes and asked if I wanted water. We always ate dinner sitting side by side. I found myself feeling a potent combination of fatherly and amorous affection for her. Occasionally, we ate alone on the roof and then, if this odd love was with me, the moon felt like a private light.

One evening I said to Anita, "Why don't you sleep in my room?" We were eating dinner, and the whole family was around us. We had all been joking and laughing and I wanted my suggestion to seem spontaneous, as if it were a product of the affection we were showing one another at that moment. Anita looked surprised, but no one else appeared to notice.

That night I carried her cot down from the children's room and placed it next to mine. Anita came into my



"We're working on reading readiness."

ELECTRIC LIGHT

Candle grease congealed, dark-streaked with wick-soot.
Rucked alps from above. The smashed thumbnail
of that ancient mangled thumb was puckered pearl,

moonlit quartz, a bleached and littered Cumae.
In the first house where I saw electric light
she sat with her fur-lined felt slippers unzipped,

year in, year out, in the same chair, and whispered
in a voice that at its loudest did nothing else
but whisper. We were both desperate

the night I was left to stay with her and wept
under the clothes, under the waste of light
left turned on in the bedroom. "What ails you, child,

what ails you, for God's sake?" Urgent, sorrowing
ails, far-off and old. Scaresome cavern waters
lapping a boatslip. Her helplessness no help.

Lisp and relapse. Eddy of sibylline English.
Splashes between a ship and dock, to which,
animula, I would come alive in time

as ferries churned and turned down Belfast Lough
towards the brow-to-glass transport of a morning train,
the very "there-you-are-and-where-are-you?"

of poetry itself. Backs of houses

room and sat down on the edge of her cot. I shut the door, which could be bolted only from the outside. I was excited and nervous. When I turned around, Anita looked sad. She had her hands between her legs and was leaning forward with her shoulders curved, like a bird in winter. My eagerness turned to disgust. I gave Anita my little transistor radio and left the light on through the night.

In the morning, though, I did not put Anita's cot back up on the second floor. All day, I thought about doing it, but my guilt was not strong enough. The second night, Anita's unhappy face only made me resentful. I switched off the light right after closing the door. I got into my cot and told Anita to lie next to me.

She lay stiff and straight. With a single fingertip under her wrist, I moved her hand onto my penis. Through the underwear and pajamas I wore, I could feel each finger, and I even imagined that I could feel the roughness of her fingerprints. But I did not do anything more than lie there with her limp hand on me. There was no pretense behind which to hide my actions, as there had been when we "played." I could not ignore her fright, or the fact that I was responsible for it. For an hour or two, I lay paralyzed. Finally, I sent her to her cot.

This repeated itself over several nights. Anita's body became less stiff. My shame diminished. I discovered the disguise I needed: pretending to sleep. I did not care that it was obvious I was shamming. What mattered was having some excuse.

One night, I loosened the cords of my pajamas and, while snoring, took Anita's hand and slipped it beneath my pajamas and underwear. I remember how startled she seemed on discovering my pubic hair. I kept my eyes closed and continued to breathe deeply. When her fingers reached the base of my penis, they would have jerked away, but my heavy hand held hers there. I showed her how to hold me, and then I made her masturbate me.

The first time, I came suddenly and with such enormous force that my whole body vanished in silver pleasure. I even stayed hard after coming. When Anita pulled her hand away, I sleepily kissed her on the forehead. For some reason I thought that if I appeared grateful she would not know that anything was wrong. "Thank you," I murmured from my sleep.

I had Anita masturbate me once or twice a night. I pretended to sleep as I guided her hand. The only sound was my wheezing snore. After she finished, Anita slipped quietly back to her cot.

I was certain that I would be caught. The latrine was on the ground floor, and Radha sometimes came down at night to urinate. A moment's curiosity would be enough. Many times, I thought I heard her footsteps and literally shoved Anita out of my cot and onto the floor. As I did this I kept snoring.

But the possibility that Anita might deliberately betray me to Radha frightened me even more. I decided to make her afraid of saying anything. Once, while she was masturbating me I rolled over and looked at her. She was on her back. Her eyes were wide and her face still. I stared at her till she seemed frightened. "What are you doing?" I finally asked. She didn't answer. I lifted myself on an elbow and continued staring. I suddenly lifted a hand, as if to slap her. Anita flinched so hard she almost fell off the cot. "This is what you do while I'm asleep?" I hissed. I didn't say anything then for several minutes. I kept looking at her. "Never tell anyone about this. If you tell people, they will think you're an animal. They will kill you with stones." I sank onto my back and stared at the ceiling. Anita went to her cot.

Nothing eased my fear, though. I grew desperate. One night, while the children were asleep and the lamp in the family room was crawling with bugs, I

like the back of hers, meat safes and mangles
in the railway-facing yards of fleeting England,

an allotment scarecrow among patted rigs,
then a town-edge soccer pitch, the groin of distance,
fields of grain like the Field of the Cloth of Gold,

tunnel gauntlet and horizon keep. To Southwark,
too, I came, from tube mouth into sunlight,
Moyola-breath by Thames's "straunge strond."

If I stood on the bow-backed chair, I could reach
the light switch. They let me and they watched me.
A touch of the little pip would work the magic.

A turn of their wireless knob and light came on
in the dial. They let me and they watched me
as I roamed at will the stations of the world.

Then they were gone and Big Ben and the news
were over. The set had been switched off,
all quiet behind the blackout except for

knitting needles ticking, wind in the flue.
She sat with her fur-lined felt slippers unzipped,
electric light shone over us, I feared

the dirt-tracked flint and fissure of her nail,
so plectrum-hard, glit-glittery, it must still keep
among beads and vertebrae in the Derry ground.

—*Seamus Heaney*

made Radha sit beside me on the sofa and started telling her that I had acted shamefully with her and the children for many years. "I drink. I curse. If I started eating meat, I wouldn't be much worse! But this is because I have been so unhappy. I am sad with what life has given me." I took her hands in mine and cried.

"Don't cry," Radha murmured. She pulled her hands away. I wept for nearly an hour. She did not know what to say and sat with me in silence, rubbing the sofa's rough blue cloth. After a while, she started crying as well. I went to temple two nights that week.

Anita became ill. She had a fever and a dry cough so deep it made her vomit. Her illness lasted a week and a half. During that time, each cough sounded to me like an accusation. I felt so guilty that I told her to sleep upstairs. I think Radha also felt guilty, because she paid more attention to this illness than she had to others in the past. "The neighbors are going to think you have t.b. if you keep coughing like that," she teased.

The cough had been gone for two days when I brought Anita back to my bed. She was in the courtyard, brushing her teeth before she went up to her cot to sleep. I stood in my doorway and watched her. Her curly hair made me think of my own receding hairline.

In the morning, Anita's face looked sunken, as though her bones had given way, and when Radha saw her she was shocked.

"Sick all night," I hurried to explain.

"Vomiting?"

"Twice."

Anita did not contradict me. How could she have?

For a week, I did not go near Anita. I told her she sounded sick and sent her to sleep by herself. She began speaking again and started to pay attention to what was happening around her. I believed at that time that it was fate as much as lust that made me tell Anita to sleep in my room again. But it was prob-

MARISA ACOCELLA

"Copywriting is too 'writing.' "

ably simply that I did not believe I would ever be discovered, for I could not imagine the world after I had been caught.

The memories of the following days are so morbid—the newspapers I placed under Anita to keep the sheets clean, the painful penetration each night, an ejaculation I would try to catch in my hand because I was afraid of getting Anita pregnant, and Anita's going to wash the blood from her vagina—that in later years I tried blotting them from my mind.

It was obvious that something was very wrong with Anita now. When she walked, she looked pained. She stopped talking and ate only after being scolded to do so. Radha was watching all this, I knew. Watching in confusion or perhaps with growing certainty. But for four or five nights there was the same horror. The details of what we did, Anita holding her breath, were so terrible that whenever I finished I believed it must have been for the last time. But each night when Anita sat on the edge of her cot I closed the door and switched off the light.

Maybe Radha came down to the courtyard to urinate and heard something. Or maybe Anita's condition over the last few weeks had finally forced her to admit the obvious. Or maybe Radha just wanted to see if we were sleeping all right.

And there I was, arching on top and Anita flat and still far below. I saw Radha's shadow before I had even turned my head. I felt slow and clumsy rolling off Anita and pulling up my pajamas and the sheet. Radha stood unmoving long after I was on my back, Anita beside me. Then she grabbed Anita by the arm and swung her onto the floor. "Go upstairs," Radha hissed. Anita stood there for a moment before she hobbled out.

I sat up.

Radha slapped me, and the heel of her hand struck my nose. I tasted the iron flavor of blood. She hit me again. "Dog! Disease!" she shouted. "If people knew about you, they would kill you as if you had rabies. They would break your head with bricks. If I told my brothers, they would cut you to pieces with a machete. Do you know what you've done? Your own daughter, animal. How long have you been doing this?"

Her questions made me wail, "I don't know why. I'm a leper." Now that the worst had happened, I felt none of the relief I had thought might accompany it. I imagined Radha telling everyone and driving me from my home onto the street. "I swear I haven't been doing it long. God is good and let me be caught the first time. I deserve to die."

"Kill yourself, then!" she yelled.

"I should. I should." I nodded and wept. A part of me was interested only in escaping blame. Another part would have actually liked to die.

"Do it, then. Use a knife. Use rope. Drown yourself in a spoonful of water."

"I should." As I said it again, we both understood that I would not.

Radha became quiet. "Who will marry her?" she asked. I think she said this only because it is the type of question they ask in movies after a rape. Suddenly she pulled off her rubber slipper and swung it hard at my cheek. The sound was like a wet cloth whipping against a rock. My nose began to bleed heavily.

"Why, God, did you marry me to this monster?" Radha asked. I tilted my head back to slow the dripping blood. The fact that Radha chose to punish me herself made me think that she would not tell anyone of her discovery. Realizing this, I started to feel grief at what I had done. I tried to speak, to apologize, but no words were right. All night I sat there as Radha cursed and hit. By dawn, my face was swollen and purple, and she was staggering from exhaustion. "I should kill myself and the children," she said. "I should pour kerosene over all of us and set us on fire."

After Rajesh and Kusum went to school that morning, Radha, Anita, and I went to the Hanuman temple and prayed. Radha and Anita sat in a corner all day and prayed. Most of the morning, I crouched on my knees before an idol of God Ram, with my forehead pressed to the floor. Over and over, I asked God to take away my evil madness. I knelt till cramps caused me to fall on the ground.

That night, we sent Rajesh and Kusum to bed early and talked with Anita in the living room. Radha and I sat on the sofa. Anita sat across from us on a chair so high that her feet did not touch the ground. We had agreed that Radha would do the talking.

"We don't want you to have any confusion about last night," Radha began. She had accepted the story that I'd had sex with Anita only once. Anita pushed herself as far back in the chair as possible and sat still. "Your *pitaji* did something bad. It is a shameful thing that he did and God will one day punish him." Since Anita's face was expressionless, Radha stopped and said, "Yes?" Anita nodded and Radha continued. "You can't tell anyone about what he did. He is ashamed. What happened wasn't anything. He will never do it again." Radha looked at me and, overcome with emotion, slapped me once more. She turned back to Anita. "But you have to forget what happened. From now on, empty your head of everything that has happened." There was a long silence, during which it was difficult to know if Radha was looking for more to say or whether it was time for Anita to speak. "You understand? Empty your head." Anita nodded again. I wondered whether it would be possible for Anita to forget, but all three of us understood that what mattered most was her silence. The conversation had lasted less than an hour when we kissed Anita's forehead and sent her to bed.

Radha and Anita started sleeping in the same room, and Radha sent our second daughter, Kusum, to live with her grandmother, saying that she didn't feel capable of taking care of three children. She offered no excuse to me.

I gave up drinking. For a while, I went to temple every day. Radha never again mentioned what had happened with Anita. But, in the first few years after I was caught, every time she became angry at me I felt dread, as if she would now announce my crime to the world. Anita behaved as if she had completely forgotten what I had done. I was glad when we moved out of the house where it had occurred, because I thought it would hasten the process of erasure. I returned to the brothels, but I never touched Anita again.

Radha lost her faith in God soon after she found me with Anita. She grew bitter and so thin that the skin on her arms and face hung in folds, even though our life kept improving and there was always yogurt in the house. During the years that Indira Gandhi spent in office, the government's power grew, and so did the income of the people who worked for it. We learned the art of being needed. I gained weight. In fact, my weight increased till the width of my shirts matched the width of my cot. As my wealth grew, I bought a toaster, a blender, a refrigerator, a television. Six years after I had applied for one, we got a phone line. Our son Rajesh came first or second in all his exams. Kusum graduated from college at eighteen, and later won a government award for a Ph.D. on peanut plants and went to live in America. Anita did not do as well as the other children, but neither Radha nor I ever scolded her. She grew up shy and easily panicked, but there was *nothing* about her that marked her as damaged. ♦

"You tell him that you find the flag offensive."

FICTION

DRINKING COFFEE ELSEWHERE

BY ZZ PACKER

Orientation games began the day I arrived at Yale from Baltimore. In my group we played heady, frustrating games for smart people. One game appeared to be charades reinterpreted by existentialists; another involved listening to rocks. Then a freshman counsellor made everyone play Trust. The idea was that if you had the faith to fall backward and wait for four scrawny former high-school geniuses to catch you, just before your head cracked on the slate sidewalk, then you might learn to trust your fellow-students. Russian roulette sounded like a better game.

"No way," I said. The white boys were waiting for me to fall, holding their arms out for me, sincerely, gallantly. "No fucking way."

"It's all cool, it's all cool," the counsellor said. Her hair was a shade of blond I'd seen only on *Playboy* covers, and she raised her hands as though backing away from a growling dog. "Sister," she said, in an I'm-down-with-the-struggle voice, "you don't have to play this game. As a person of color, you shouldn't have to fit into any white, patriarchal system."

I said, "It's a bit too late for that."

In the next game, all I had to do was wait in a circle until it was my turn to say what inanimate object I wanted to be. One guy said he'd like to be a gadfly, like Socrates. "Stop me if I wax Platonic," he said. The girl next to him was eating a rice cake. She wanted to be the Earth, she said. Earth with a capital "E."

There was one other black person in the circle. He wore an Exeter T-shirt and his overly elastic expressions resembled a series of facial exercises. At the end of each person's turn, he smiled and bobbed his head with unfettered enthusiasm. "Oh, that was good," he said, as if the game were an experiment he'd set up and the results were turning out better than he'd expected. "Good, good, good!"

When it was my turn I said, "My name is Dina, and if I had to be any object, I guess I'd be a revolver." The sunlight dulled as if on cue. Clouds passed rapidly overhead, presaging rain. I don't know why I said it. Until that moment I'd been good in all the ways that were meant to matter. I was an honor-roll student—though I'd learned long ago not to mention it in the part of Baltimore where I lived. Suddenly I was hard-bitten and recalcitrant, the kind of kid who took pleasure in sticking pins into cats; the kind who chased down smart kids to spray them with mace.

"A revolver," a counsellor said, stroking his chin, as if it had grown a rabbinical beard. "Could you please elaborate?"

The black guy cocked his head and frowned, as if the beakers and Erlenmeyer flasks of his experiment had grown legs and scurried off.

"You were just kidding," the dean said, "about wiping out all of mankind. That, I suppose, was a joke." She squinted at me. One of her hands curved atop the other to form a pink, freckled molehill on her desk.

"Well," I said, "maybe I meant it at the time." I quickly saw that that was not the answer she wanted. "I don't know. I think it's the architecture."

Through the dimming light of the dean's-office window, I could see the fortress of the old campus. On my ride from the bus station to the campus, I'd barely glimpsed New Haven—a flash of crumpled building here, a trio of straggly kids there. A lot like Baltimore. But everything had changed when we reached those streets hooded by the Gothic buildings. I imagined how the college must have looked when it was founded, when most of the students owned slaves. I pictured men wearing tights and knickers, smoking pipes.

"The architecture," the dean repeated. She bit her lip and seemed to be making a calculation of some sort. I noticed that she blinked less often than most people. I sat there, waiting to see how long it would be before she blinked again.

My revolver comment won me a year's worth of psychiatric counselling, weekly meetings with Dean Guest, and—since the parents of the roommate I'd never met weren't too hip on the idea of their Amy sharing a bunk bed with a budding homicidal loony—my very own room.

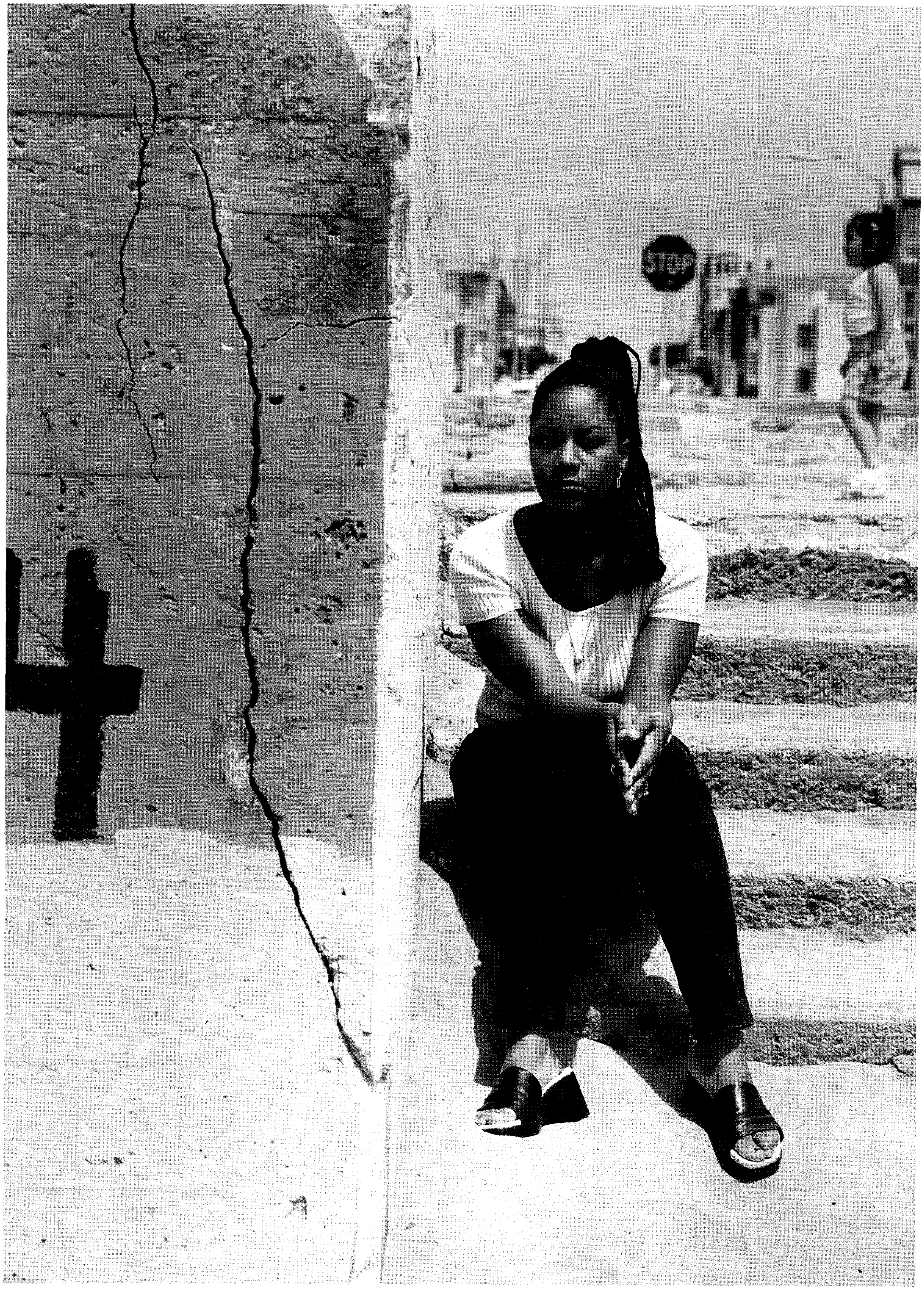
Shortly after getting my first D, I also received the first knock on my door. The female counsellors never knocked. The dean had spoken to them; I was a priority. Every other day, right before dinnertime, they'd look in on me, unannounced. "Just checking up," a counsellor would say. It was the voice of a suburban mother in training. By the second week, I had made a point of sitting in a chair in front of the door, just when I expected a counsellor to pop her head around. This was intended to startle them. I also made a point of being naked. The unannounced visits ended.

The knocking persisted. Through the peephole I saw a white face, distorted and balloonish.

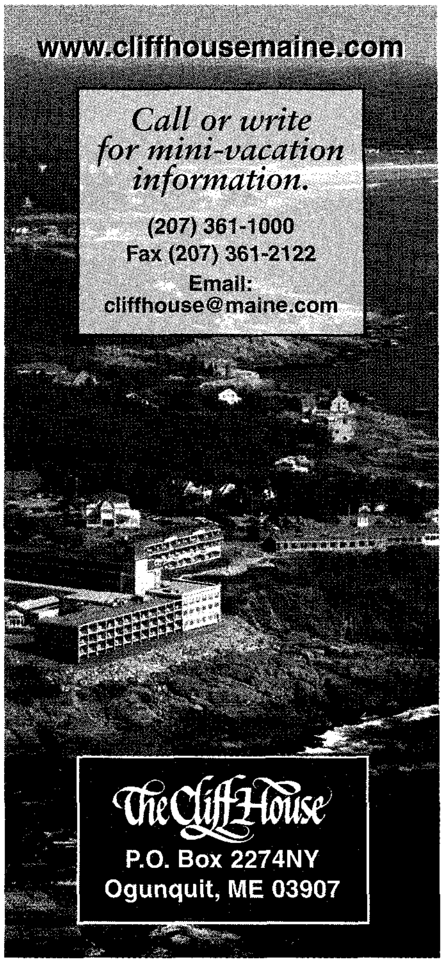
"Let me in." The person looked like a boy but sounded like a girl. "Let me in," the voice repeated.

"Not a chance," I said.

Then the person began to sob, and I heard a back slump against the door. If I hadn't known the person was white from the peephole, I'd have known it from a display like this. Black people didn't knock on strangers' doors, crying. Not that I understood the black



ZZ Packer at Ocean Beach, in San Francisco. Photograph by Andrea Artz.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people at Yale. There was something pitiful in how cool they were. Occasionally one would reach out to me with missionary zeal, but I'd rebuff that person with haughty silence.

"I don't have anyone to talk to!" the person on the other side of the door cried.

"That is correct."

"When I was a child," the person said, "I played by myself in a corner of the schoolyard all alone. I hated dolls and I hated games, animals were not friendly and birds flew away. If anyone was looking for me I hid behind a tree and cried out 'I am an orphan—' "

I opened the door. It was a she.

"Plagiarist!" I yelled. She had just recited a Frank O'Hara poem as though she'd thought it up herself. I knew the poem because it was one of the few things I'd been forced to read that I wished I'd written myself.

The girl turned to face me, smiling weakly, as though her triumph were not in getting me to open the door but in the fact that she was able to smile at all when she was so accustomed to crying. She was large but not obese, and crying had turned her face the color of raw chicken. She blew her nose into the waist end of her T-shirt, revealing a pale belly.

"How do you know that poem?"

She sniffed. "I'm in your Contemporary Poetry class."

She was Canadian and her name was Heidi, although she said she wanted people to call her Henrik. "That's a guy's name," I said. "What do you want? A sex change?"

She looked at me with so little surprise that I suspected she hadn't discounted this as an option. Then her story came out in teary, hiccup-like bursts. She had sucked some "cute guy's dick" and he'd told everybody and now people thought she was "a slut."

"Why'd you suck his dick? Aren't you a lesbian?"

She fit the bill. Short hair, hard, roach-stomping shoes. Dressed like an aspiring plumber. The lesbians I'd seen on TV were wiry, thin strips of muscle, but Heidi was round and soft and had a moonlike face. Drab mud-colored hair. And lesbians had cats. "Do you have a cat?" I asked.

Her eyes turned glossy with new tears. "No," she said, her voice wavering, "and I'm not a lesbian. Are you?"

"Do I look like one?" I said.

She didn't answer.

"O.K." I said. "I could suck a guy's dick, too, if I wanted. But I don't. The human penis is one of the most germ-ridden objects there is." Heidi looked at me, unconvinced. "What I meant to say," I began again, "is that I don't like anybody. Period. Guys or girls. I'm a misanthrope."

"I am, too."

"No," I said, guiding her back through my door and out into the hallway. "You're not."

"Have you had dinner?" she asked. "Let's go to Commons."

I pointed to a pyramid of ramen-noodle packages on my windowsill. "See that? That means I never have to go to Commons. Aside from class, I have contact with no one."

"I hate it here, too," she said. "I should have gone to McGill, eh."

"The way to feel better," I said, "is to get some ramen and lock yourself in your room. Everyone will forget about you and that guy's dick and you won't have to see anyone ever again. If anyone looks for you—"

"I'll hide behind a tree."

"A revolver?" Dr. Raeburn said, flipping through a manila folder. He looked up at me as if to ask another question, but he didn't.

Dr. Raeburn was the psychiatrist. He had the gray hair and whiskers of a Civil War general. He was also a chain smoker with beige teeth and a navy wool jacket smeared with ash. He asked about the revolver at the beginning of my first visit. When I was unable to explain myself he smiled, as if this were perfectly respectable.

"Tell me about your parents."

I wondered what he already had on file. The folder was thick, though I hadn't said a thing of significance since Day One.

"My father was a dick and my mother seemed to like him."

He patted his pockets for his cigarettes. "That's some heavy stuff," he said. "How do you feel about Dad?" The man couldn't say the word "father." "Is Dad someone you see often?"

"I hate my father almost as much as I hate the word 'Dad.' "

"I want to get married and start a family with you—although God knows who I'll want to finish it with."

• •

He started tapping his cigarette.

"You can't smoke in here."

"That's right," he said, and slipped the cigarette back into the packet. He smiled, widening his eyes brightly. "Don't ever start."

I thought that that first encounter would be the last of Heidi, but then her head appeared in a window of Linsly-Chit during my Chaucer class. Next, she swooped down a flight of stairs in Harkness. She hailed me from across Elm Street and found me in the Sterling Library stacks. After one of my meetings with Dr. Raeburn, she was waiting for me outside Health Services, legs crossed, cleaning her fingernails.

"You know," she said, as we walked through Old Campus, "you've got to stop eating ramen. Not only does it lack a single nutrient but it's full of MSG."

"I like eating chemicals," I said. "It keeps the skin radiant."

"There's also hepatitis." She already knew how to get my attention—mention a disease.

"You get hepatitis from unwashed lettuce," I said. "If there's anything safe from the perils of the food chain, it's ramen."

"But you refrigerate what you don't eat. Each time you reheat it, you're killing good bacteria, which then can't keep the bad bacteria in check. A guy got sick from reheating Chinese noodles, and his son died from it. I read it in the *Times*." With this, she put a jovial arm around my neck. I continued walking, a little stunned. Then, just as quickly, she dropped her arm and stopped walking. I stopped, too.

"Did you notice that I put my arm around you?"

"Yes," I said. "Next time, I'll have to chop it off."

"I don't want you to get sick," she said. "Let's eat at Commons."

In the cold air, her arm had felt good.

The problem with Commons was that it was too big; its ceiling was as high as a cathedral's, but below it there were no awestruck worshippers,

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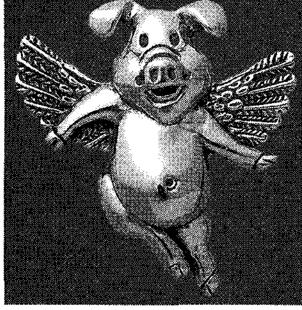

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only eighteen-year-olds at heavy wooden tables, chatting over veal patties and Jell-O.

We got our food, tacos stuffed with meat substitute, and made our way through the maze of tables. The Koreans had a table. Each singing group had a table. The crew team sat at a long table of its own. We passed the black table. The sheer quantity of Heidi's flesh accentuated just how white she was.

"How you doing, sista?" a guy asked, his voice full of accusation, eyeballing me as though I were clad in a Klansman's sheet and hood. "I guess we won't see you till graduation."

"If," I said, "you graduate."

The remark was not well received. As I walked past, I heard protests, angry and loud, as if they'd discovered a cheat at their poker game. Heidi and I found an unoccupied table along the periphery, which was isolated and dark. We sat down. Heidi prayed over her tacos.

"I thought you didn't believe in God," I said.

"Not in the God depicted in the Judeo-Christian Bible, but I do believe that nature's essence is a spirit that—"

"All right," I said. I had begun to eat, and cubes of diced tomato fell from my mouth when I spoke. "Stop right there. Tacos and spirits don't mix."

"You've always got to be so flip," she said. "I'm going to apply for another friend."

"There's always Mr. Dick," I said. "Slurp, slurp."

"You are so lame. So unbelievably lame. I'm going out with Mr. Dick. Thursday night at Atticus. His name is Keith."

Heidi hadn't mentioned Mr. Dick since the day I'd met her. That was more than a month ago and we'd spent a lot of that time together. I checked for signs that she was lying; her habit of smiling too much, her eyes bright and cheeks full, so that she looked like a chipmunk. But she looked normal. Pleased, even, to see me so flustered.

"You're insane! What are you going to do this time?" I asked. "Sleep with him? Then when he makes fun of you, what? Come pound your head on my door reciting the 'Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath'?"

"He's going to apologize for before. And don't call me insane. You're the one going to the psychiatrist."

"Well, I'm not going to suck his dick, that's for sure."

She put her arm around me in mock comfort, but I pushed it off, and ignored her. She touched my shoulder again, and I turned, annoyed, but it wasn't Heidi after all; a sepia-toned boy dressed in khakis and a crisp plaid shirt was standing behind me. He handed me a hot-pink square of paper without a word, then briskly made his way toward the other end of Commons, where the crowds blossomed. Heidi leaned over and read it: "Wear Black Leather—the Less, the Better."

"It's a gay party," I said, crumpling the card. "He thinks we're fucking gay."

Heidi and I signed on to work at the Saybrook Dining Hall as dishwashers. The job consisted of dumping food from plates and trays into a vat of rushing water. It seemed straightforward, but then I learned better. You wouldn't believe what people could do with food until you worked in a dish room. Lettuce and crackers and soup would be bullied into a pulp in the bowl of some bored anorexic; ziti would be mixed with honey and granola; trays would appear heaped with mashed-potato snow women with melted chocolate ice cream for hair. Frat boys arrived at the dish-room window, en masse. They liked to fill glasses with food, then seal them, airtight, onto their trays. If you tried to prize them off, milk, Worcestershire sauce, peas, chunks of bread vomited onto your dish-room uniform.

When this happened one day in the middle of the lunch rush, for what seemed like the hundredth time, I tipped the tray toward one of the frat boys, popping the glasses off so that the mess spurted onto his Shetland sweater.

He looked down at his sweater. "Lesbo bitch!"

"No," I said, "that would be your mother."

Heidi, next to me, clenched my arm in support, but I remained motionless, waiting to see what the frat boy would do. He glared at me for a minute, then walked away.

"Let's take a smoke break," Heidi said.

I didn't smoke, but Heidi had begun to, because she thought it would help her lose weight. As I hefted a stack of glasses through the steamer, she lit up.

"Soft packs remind me of you," she said. "Just when you've smoked them all and you think there's none left, there's always one more, hiding in that little crushed corner." Before I could respond she said, "Oh, God. Not another mouse. You know whose job that is."

By the end of the rush, the floor mats got full and slippery with food. This was when mice tended to appear, scurrying over our shoes; more often than not, a mouse got caught in the grating that covered the drains in the floor. Sometimes the mouse was already dead by the time we noticed it. This one was alive.

"No way," I said. "This time you're going to help. Get some gloves and a trash bag."

"That's all I'm getting. I'm not getting that mouse out of there."

"Put on the gloves," I ordered. She winced, but put them on. "Reach down," I said. "At an angle, so you get at its middle. Otherwise, if you try to get it by its tail, the tail will break off."

"This is filthy, eh."

"That's why we're here," I said. "To clean up filth. Eh."

She reached down, but would not touch the mouse. I put my hand around her arm and pushed it till her hand made contact. The cries from the mouse were soft, songlike. "Oh, my God," she said. "Oh, my God, ohmigod." She wrestled it out of the grating and turned her head away.

"Don't you let it go," I said.

"Where's the food bag? It'll smother itself if I drop it in the food bag. Quick," she said, her head still turned away, her eyes closed. "Lead me to it."

"No. We are not going to smother this mouse. We've got to break its neck."

"You're one heartless bitch."

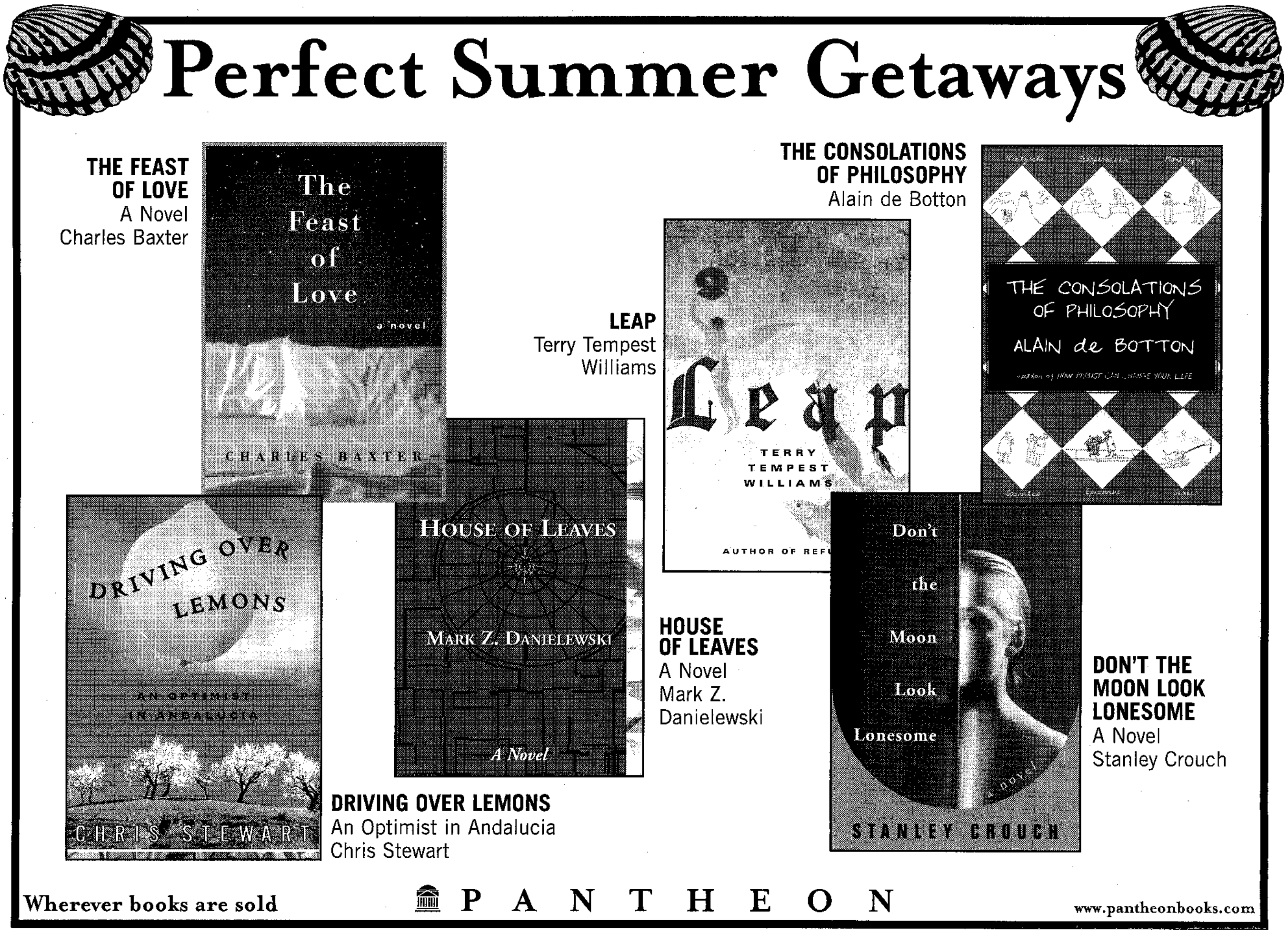
I wondered how to explain that if death is unavoidable it should be quick and painless. My mother had died slowly. At the hospital, they'd said it was kidney failure, but I knew that, in the end, it was my father. He made her scared to live in her own home, until she was finally driven away from it in an ambulance.

"Breaking its neck will save it the pain of smothering," I said. "Breaking its neck is more humane. Take the trash bag and cover it so you won't get any blood on you, then crush."

The loud jets of the steamer had shut off automatically and the dish room grew quiet. Heidi breathed in deeply, then crushed the mouse. She shuddered, disgusted. "Now what?"

"What do you mean, 'Now what?' Throw the little bastard in the trash."

At our third session, I told Dr. Raeburn I didn't mind if he smoked. He sat on the sill of his open window, smoking behind a jungle screen of office plants.



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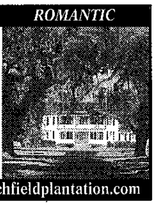

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We spent the first ten minutes discussing the Iliad, and whether or not the text actually states that Achilles had been dipped in the River Styx. He said it did, and I said it didn't. After we'd finished with the Iliad, and with my new job in what he called "the scullery," he asked more questions about my parents. I told him nothing. It was none of his business. Instead, I talked about Heidi. I told him about that day in Commons, Heidi's plan to go on a date with Mr. Dick, and the invitation we'd been given to the gay party.

"You seem preoccupied by this soirée." He arched his eyebrows at the word "soirée."

"Wouldn't you be?"

"Dina," he said slowly, in a way that made my name seem like a song title, "have you ever had a romantic interest?"

"You want to know if I've ever had a boyfriend?" I said. "Just go ahead and ask if I've ever fucked anybody."

This appeared to surprise him. "I think that you are having a crisis of identity," he said.

"Oh, is that what this is?"

His profession had taught him not to roll his eyes. Instead, his exasperation revealed itself with a tiny pursing of his lips, as though he'd just tasted something awful and were trying very hard not to offend the cook.

"It doesn't have to be, as you say, someone you've fucked, it doesn't have to be a boyfriend," he said.

"Well, what are you trying to say? If it's not a boy, then you're saying it's a girl—"

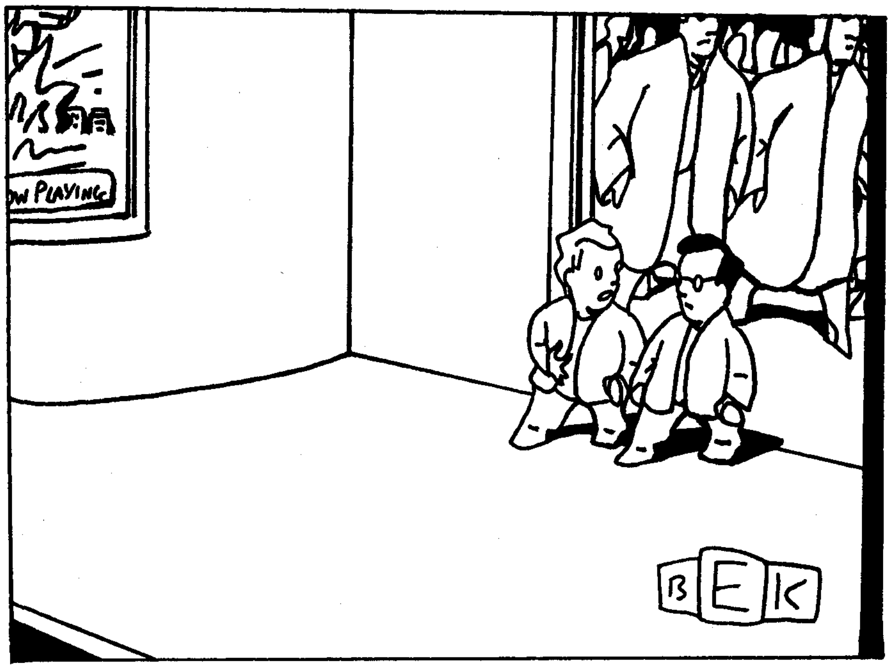
"Calm down. It could be a crush, Dina." He lit one cigarette off another. "A crush on a male teacher, a crush on a dog, for heaven's sake. An interest. Not necessarily a relationship."

It was sacrifice time. If I could spend the next half hour talking about some boy, then I'd have given him what he wanted.

So I told him about the boy with the nice shoes.

I was sixteen and had spent the last few coins in my pocket on bus fare to buy groceries. I didn't like going to the Super Fresh two blocks away from my house, plunking government food stamps into the hands of the cashiers. "There she go reading," one of them once said, even though I was only carrying a book. "Don't your eyes get tired?"

On Greenmount Avenue you could read schoolbooks—that was understandable. The government and your teachers forced you to read them. But anything else was anti-social. It meant you'd rather submit to the words of some white dude than shoot the breeze with your neighbors.



"I thought it had a lot to say about evil villains who want to take over the world."

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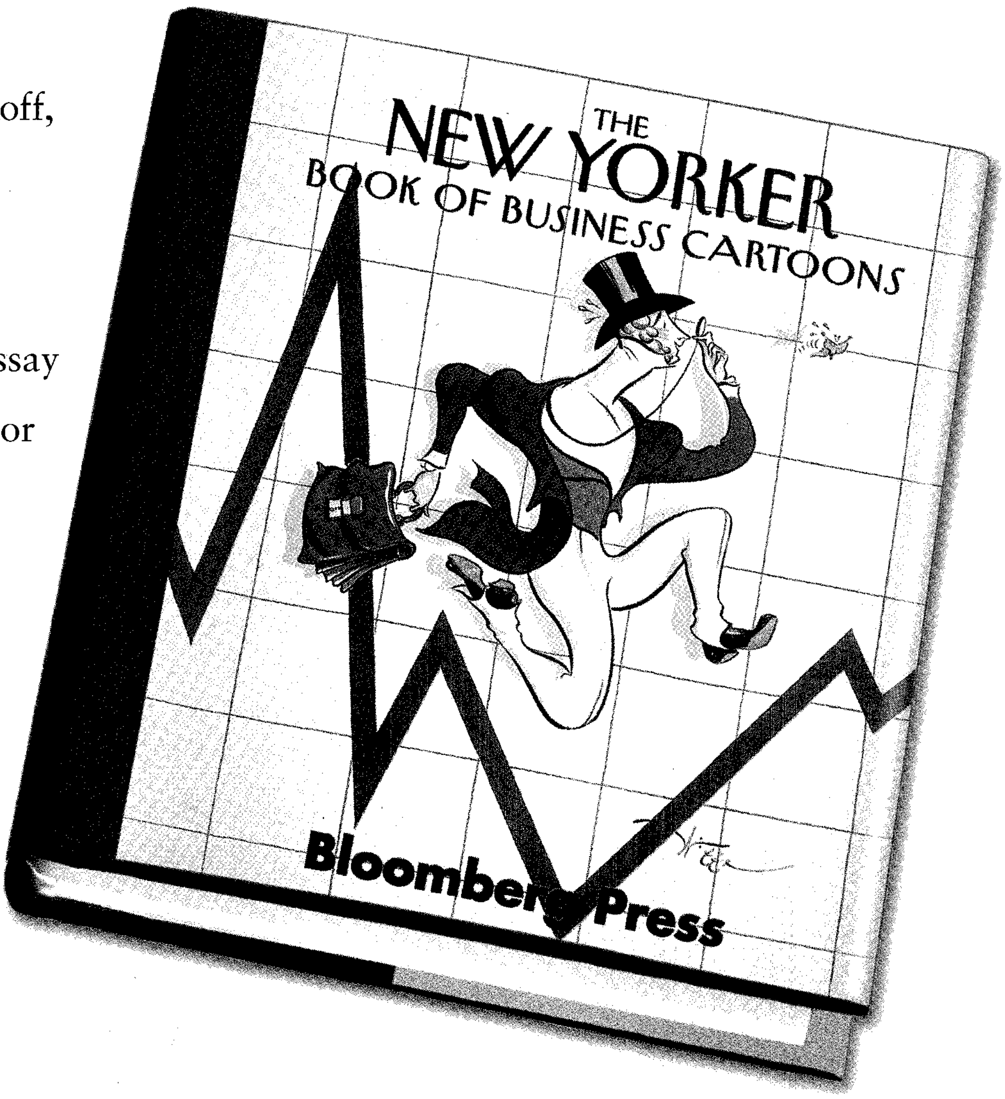
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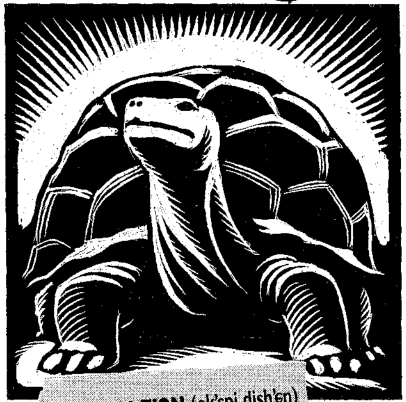
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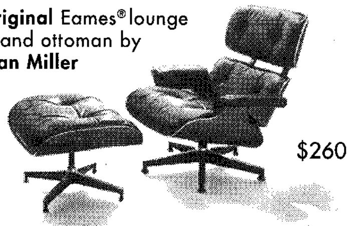
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I hated those cashiers, and I hated them seeing me with food stamps, so I took the bus and shopped elsewhere. That day, I got off the bus at Govans, and though the neighborhood was black like my own—hair salon after hair salon of airbrushed signs promising arabesque hair styles and inch-long fingernails—the houses were neat and orderly, nothing at all like Greenmount, where every other house had at least one shattered window. The store was well swept, and people quietly checked long grocery lists—no screaming kids, no loud cashier-customer altercations. I got the groceries and left the store.

I decided to walk back. It was a fall day, and I walked for blocks. Then I sensed someone following me. I walked more quickly, my arms around the sack, the leafy lettuce tickling my nose. I didn't want to hold the sack so close that it would break the eggs or squash the hamburger buns, but it was slipping, and as I looked behind a boy my age, maybe older, rushed toward me.

"Let me help you," he said.

"That's all right." I set the bag on the sidewalk. Maybe I saw his face, maybe it was handsome enough, but what I noticed first, splayed on either side of the bag, were his shoes. They were nice shoes, real leather, a stitched design like a widow's peak on each one, or like birds' wings, and for the first time in my life I understood what people meant when they said "wing-tip shoes."

"I watched you carry them groceries out that store, then you look around, like you're lost, but like you liked being lost, then you walk down the sidewalk for blocks and blocks. Rearranging that bag, it almost gone to slip, then hefting it back up again."

"Huh, huh," I said.

"And then I passed my own house and was still following you. And then your bag really look like it was gone crash and everything. So I just thought I'd help." He sucked in his bottom lip, as if to keep it from making a smile. "What's your name?" When I told him, he said, "Dina, my name is Cecil." Then he said, " 'D' comes right after 'C.' "

"Yes," I said, "it does, doesn't it."

Then, half question, half statement, he said, "I could carry your groceries for you? And walk you home?"

I stopped the story there. Dr. Raeburn kept looking at me. "Then what happened?"

I couldn't tell him the rest: that I had not wanted the boy to walk me home, that I didn't want someone with such nice shoes to see where I lived.

Dr. Raeburn would only have pitied me if I'd told him that I ran down the sidewalk after I told the boy no, that I fell, the bag slipped, and the eggs cracked, their yolks running all over the lettuce. Clear amniotic fluid coated the can of cinnamon rolls. I left the bag there on the sidewalk, the groceries spilled out randomly like cards loosed from a deck. When I returned home, I told my mother that I'd lost the food stamps.

"Lost?" she said. I'd expected her to get angry, I'd wanted her to get angry, but she hadn't. "Lost?" she repeated. Why had I been so clumsy and nervous around a harmless boy? I could have brought the groceries home and washed off the egg yolk, but, instead, I'd just left them there. "Come on," Mama said, snuffing her tears, pulling my arm, trying to get me to join her and start yanking cushions off the couch. "We'll find enough change here. We got to get something for dinner before your father gets back."

We'd already searched the couch for money the previous week, and I knew there'd be nothing now, but I began to push my fingers into the couch's boniest corners, pretending that it was only a matter of time before I'd find some change or a lost watch or an earring. Something pawnable, perhaps.

"What happened next?" Dr. Raeburn asked again. "Did you let the boy walk you home?"

"My house was far, so we went to his house instead." Though I was sure Dr. Raeburn knew that I was making this part up, I continued. "We made out on his sofa. He kissed me."

Dr. Raeburn lit his next cigarette like a detective. Cool, suspicious. "How did it feel?"

"You know," I said. "Like a kiss feels. It felt nice. The kiss felt very, very nice."

Raeburn smiled gently, though he seemed unconvinced. When he called time on our session his cigarette had become one long pole of ash. I left his office, walking quickly down the corridor, afraid to look back. It would be like him to trot after me, his navy blazer flapping, just to eke the truth out of me. *You never kissed anyone.* The words slid from my brain, and knotted in my stomach.

When I reached my dorm, I found an old record player blocking my door and a Charles Mingus LP propped beside it. I carried them inside and then, lying on the floor, I played the Mingus over and over again until I fell asleep. I slept feeling as though Dr. Raeburn had attached electrodes to my head, willing into my mind a dream about my mother. I saw the lemon meringue of her skin, the long bone of her arm as she reached down to clip her toenails. I'd come home from a school trip to an aquarium, and I was explaining the differences between baleen and sperm whales according to the size of their heads, the range of their habitats, their feeding patterns.

I awoke remembering the expression on her face after I'd finished my dizzying whale lecture. She looked like a tourist who'd asked for directions to a place she thought was simple enough to get to only to hear a series of hypothetical turns, alleys, one-way streets. Her response was to nod politely at the perilous elaborateness of it all; to nod in the knowledge that she would never be able to get where she wanted to go.

The dishwashers always closed down the dining hall. One night, after everyone else had punched out, Heidi and I took a break, and though I wasn't a smoker, we set two milk crates upside down on the floor and smoked cigarettes.

The dishwashing machines were off, but steam still rose from them like a jungle mist. Outside in the winter air, students were singing carols in their groomed and tailored singing-group voices. The Whiffenpoofs were back in New Haven after a tour around the world, and I guess their return was a huge deal. Heidi and I craned our necks to watch the year's first snow through an open window.

"What are you going to do when you're finished?" Heidi asked. Sexy question marks of smoke drifted up to the windows before vanishing.

"Take a bath."

She swatted me with her free hand. "No, silly. Three years from now. When you leave Yale."

"I don't know. Open up a library. Somewhere where no one comes in for books. A library in a desert."

She looked at me as though she'd expected this sort of answer and didn't know why she'd asked in the first place.

"What are you going to do?" I asked her.

"Open up a psych clinic. In a desert. And my only patient will be some wacko who runs a library."

"Ha," I said. "Whatever you do, don't work in a dish room ever again. You're no good." I got up from the crate. "C'mon. Let's hose the place down."

We put out our cigarettes on the floor, since it was our job to clean it,

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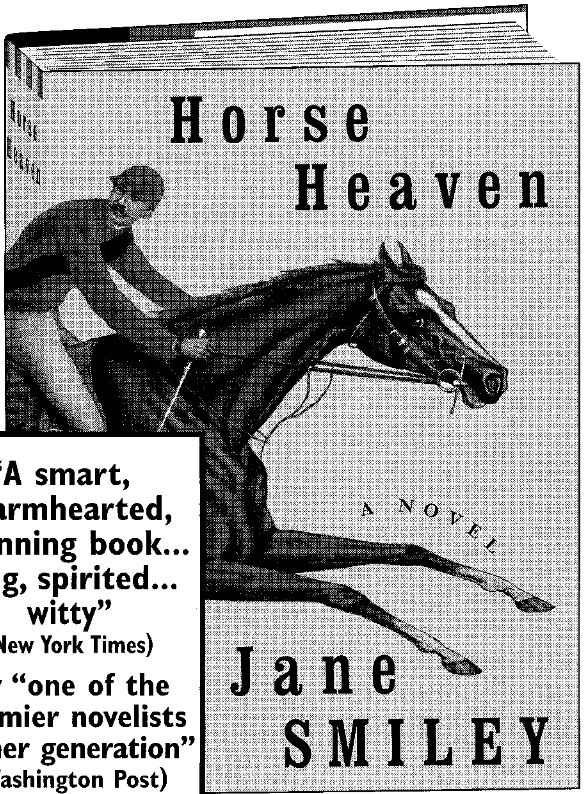

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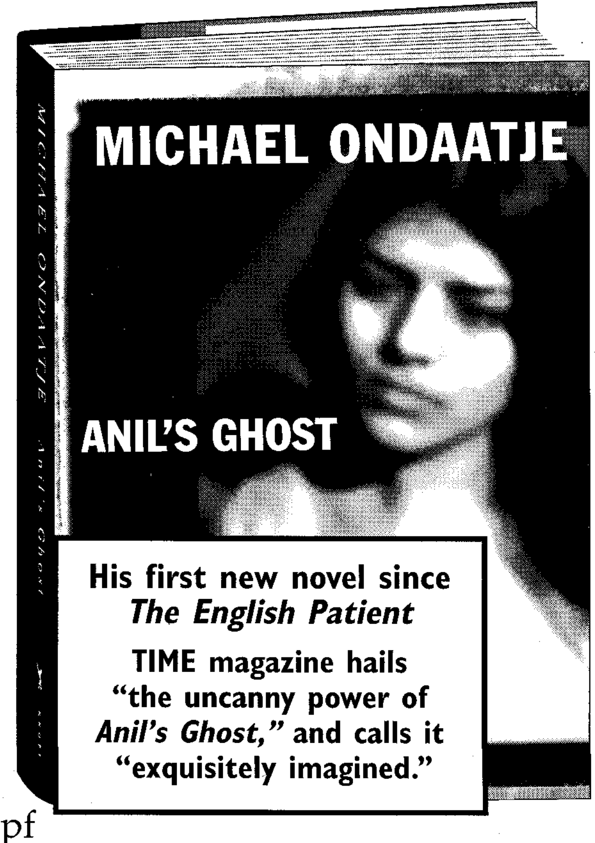

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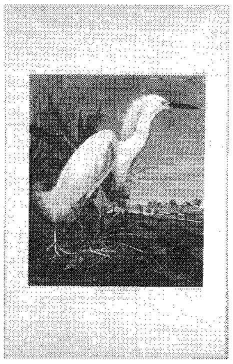

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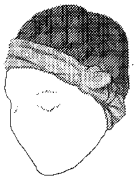

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anyway. We held squirt guns in one hand and used the other to douse the floors with the standard-issue, eye-burning cleaning solution. We hosed the dish room, the kitchen, the serving line, sending the water and crud and suds into the drains. Then we hosed them again so the solution wouldn't eat holes in our shoes as we left. Then I had an idea. I unbuckled my belt.

"What the hell are you doing?" Heidi said.

"Listen, it's too cold to go outside with our uniforms all wet. We could just take a shower right here. There's nobody but us."

"What the fuck, eh?"

I let my pants drop, then took off my shirt and panties. I didn't wear a bra, since I didn't have much to fill one. I took off my shoes and hung my clothes on the stepladder.

"You've flipped," Heidi said. "I mean, really, psych-ward flipped."

I soaped up with the liquid hand soap until I felt as glazed as a ham. "Stand back and spray me."

"Oh, my God," she said. I didn't know whether she was confused or delighted, but she picked up the squirt gun and sprayed me. She was laughing. Then she got too close and the water started to sting.

"God damn it!" I said. "That hurt!"

"I was wondering what it would take to make you say that."

When all the soap had been rinsed off, I put on my regular clothes and said, "O.K. You're up next."

"No way," she said.

"Yes way."

She started to take off her uniform shirt, then stopped.

"What?"

"I'm too fat."

"You goddam right." She always said she was fat. One time, I'd told her that she should shut up about it, that large black women wore their fat like mink coats. "You're big as a house," I said now. "Frozen yogurt may be low in calories but not if you eat five tubs of it. Take your clothes off. I want to get out of here."

She began taking off her uniform, then stood there, hands cupped over her breasts, crouching at the pubic bone.

"Open up," I said, "or we'll never get done."

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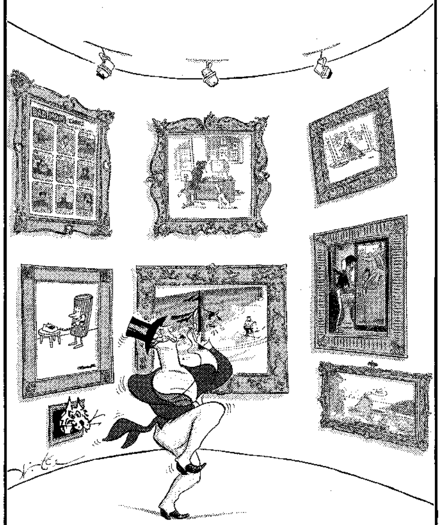

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Her hands remained where they were. I threw the bottle of liquid soap at her, and she had to catch it, revealing herself as she did.

I turned on the squirt gun, and she stood there, stiff, arms at her sides, eyes closed, as though awaiting mummification. I began with the water on low, and she turned around in a full circle, hesitantly, letting the droplets from the spray fall on her as if she were submitting to a death by stoning.

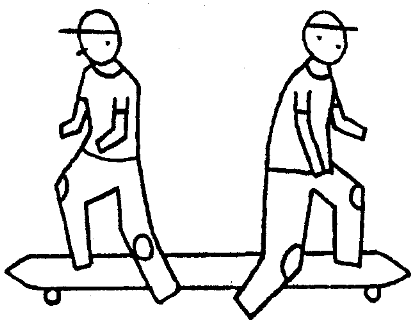
When I increased the water pressure, she slipped and fell on the sudsy floor. She stood up and then slipped again. This time she laughed and remained on the floor, rolling around on it as I sprayed.

I think I began to love Heidi that night in the dish room, but who is to say that I hadn't begun to love her the first time I met her? I sprayed her and sprayed her, and she turned over and over like a large beautiful dolphin, lolling about in the sun.

Heidi started sleeping at my place. Sometimes she slept on the floor; sometimes we slept sardinelike, my feet at her head, until she complained that my feet were "taunting" her. When we finally slept head to head, she said, "Much better." She was so close I could smell her toothpaste. "I like your hair," she told me, touching it through the darkness. "You should wear it out more often."

"White people always say that about black people's hair. The worse it looks, the more they say they like it."

I'd expected her to disagree, but she kept touching my hair, her hands passing through it till my scalp tingled. When she began to touch the hair around the edge of my face, I felt myself quake. Her fingertips stopped for a moment, as if checking my pulse, then resumed. "I like how it feels right here. See, mine just starts with the same old texture as the rest of my hair." She found my hand under the blanket and brought it to her hairline. "See," she said.



It was dark. As I touched her hair, it seemed as though I could smell it, too. Not a shampoo smell. Something richer, murkier. A bit dead, but sweet, like the decaying wood of a ship. She guided my hand.

"I see," I said. The record she'd given me was playing in my mind, and I kept trying to shut it off. I could also hear my mother saying that this is what happens when you've been around white people: things get weird. So weird I could hear the stylus etching its way into the flat vinyl of the record. "Listen," I said finally, when the bass and saxes started up. I heard Heidi breathe deeply, but she said nothing.

We spent the winter and some of the spring in my room—never hers—missing tests, listening to music, looking out my window to comment on people who wouldn't have given us a second thought. We read books related to none of our classes. I got riled up by "The Autobiography of Malcolm X" and "The Chomsky Reader"; Heidi read aloud passages from "The Anxiety of Influence." We guiltily read mysteries and "Clan of the Cave Bear," then immediately threw them away. Once, we looked up from our books at exactly the same moment, as though trapped at a dinner table with nothing to say. A pleasant trap of silence.

Then one weekend I went back to Baltimore. When I returned, to a sleepy, tree-scented spring, a group of students were holding what was called "Coming Out Day." I watched it from my room.

The m.c. was the sepia boy who'd invited us to that party months back. His speech was strident but still smooth, and peppered with jokes. There was a speech about AIDS, with lots of statistics: nothing that seemed to make "coming out" worth it. Then the women spoke. One girl pronounced herself "out" as casually as if she'd announced the time. Another said nothing at all: she appeared at the microphone accompanied by a woman who began cutting off her waist-length, bleached-blond hair. The woman doing the cutting

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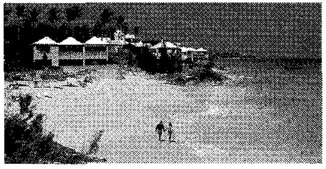

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tossed the shorn hair in every direction as she cut. People were clapping and cheering and catching the locks of hair.

And then there was Heidi. She was proud that she liked girls, she said when she reached the microphone. She loved them, wanted to sleep with them. She was a dyke, she said repeatedly, stabbing her finger to her chest in case anyone was unsure to whom she was referring. She could not have seen me. I was across the street, three stories up. And yet, when everyone clapped for her, she seemed to be looking straight at me.

Heidi knocked. "Let me in."

It was like the first time I met her. The tears, the raw pink of her face.

We hadn't spoken in weeks. Outside, pink-and-white blossoms hung from the Old Campus trees. Students played hackeysack in T-shirts and shorts. Though I was the one who'd broken away after she went up to that podium, I still half expected her to poke her head out a window in Linsly-Chit, or tap on my back in Harkness, or even join me in the Commons dining hall, where I'd asked for my dish-room shift to be transferred. She did none of these.

"Well," I said, "what is it?"

She looked at me. "My mother," she said.

She continued to cry, but it seemed to have grown so silent in my room I wondered if I could hear the numbers change on my digital clock.

"When my parents were getting divorced," she said, "my mother bought a car. A used one. An El Dorado. It was filthy. It looked like a huge crushed can coming up the street. She kept trying to clean it out. I mean—"

I nodded and tried to think what to say in the pause she left behind. Finally I said, "We had one of those," though I was sure ours was an Impala.

She looked at me, eyes steely from trying not to cry. "Anyway, she'd drive me around in it and although she didn't like me to eat in it, I always did. One day, I was eating cantaloupe slices, spitting the seeds on the floor. Maybe a month later, I saw this little sprout, growing right up from the car floor. I just started laughing and she kept saying what, what? I was laughing and then I saw she was so—"

She didn't finish. So what? So sad? So awful? Heidi looked at me with what seemed to be a renewed vigor. "We could have gotten a better car, eh?"

"It's all right. It's not a big deal," I said.

Of course, that was the wrong thing to say. And I really didn't mean it to sound the way it had come out.

I told Dr. Raeburn about Heidi's mother having cancer and how I'd said it wasn't a big deal, though I'd wanted to say exactly the opposite. I meant that I knew what it was like to have a parent die. My mother had died. I knew how eventually one accustoms oneself to the physical world's lack of sympathy: the buses that still run on time, the kids who still play in the street, the clocks that won't stop ticking for the person who's gone.

"You're pretending," Dr. Raeburn said, not sage or professional but a little shocked by the discovery, as if I'd been trying to hide a pack of his cigarettes behind my back.

"I'm pretending?" I shook my head. "All those years of psych grad," I said. "And to tell me *that*?"

"You construct stories about yourself and dish them out—one for you, one for you—" Here he reënacted the process, showing me handing out lies as if they were apples.

"Pretending. I believe the professional name for it might be denial," I said. "Are you calling me gay?"

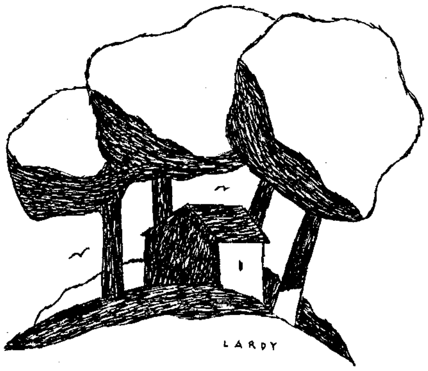
He pursed his lips noncommittally. "No, Dina. I don't think you're gay."

I checked his eyes. I couldn't read them.

"No. Not at all," he said, sounding as if he were telling a subtle joke. "But maybe you'll finally understand."

"Understand what?"

"That constantly saying what one doesn't mean accustoms the mouth to



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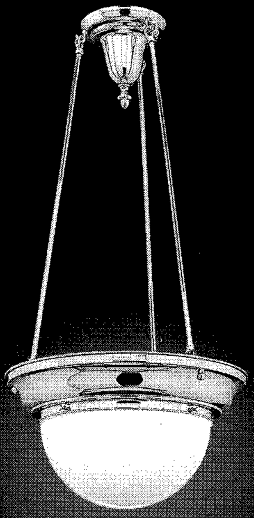

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meaningless phrases." His eyes narrowed. "Maybe you'll understand that when you need to express something truly significant, your mouth will revert to the insignificant nonsense it knows so well." He looked at me, his hands sputtering in the air in a gesture of defeat. "Who knows?" he asked, with a glib, psychiatric smile I'd never seen before. "Maybe it's your survival mechanism. Black living in a white world."

I heard him, but only vaguely. I'd hooked on to that one word, pretending. What Dr. Raeburn would never understand was that pretending was what had got me this far. I remembered the morning of my mother's funeral. I'd been given milk to settle my stomach; I'd pretended it was coffee. I imagined I was drinking coffee elsewhere. Some Arabic-speaking country where the thick coffee served in little cups was so strong it could keep you awake for days. Some Arabic country where I'd sit in a tented café and be more than happy to don a veil.

Heidi wanted me to go with her to the funeral. She'd sent this message through the dean. "We'll pay for your ticket to Vancouver," the dean said.

"What about my ticket back?" I asked. "Maybe the shrink will pay for that."

The dean looked at me as though I were an insect she'd like to squash. "We'll pay for the whole thing. We might even pay for some lessons in manners."

So I packed my suitcase and walked from my suicide-single dorm to Heidi's room. A thin wispy girl in ragged cutoffs and a shirt that read "LSBN!" answered the door. A group of short-haired girls in thick black leather jackets, bundled up despite the summer heat, encircled Heidi in a protective fairy ring. They looked at me critically, clearly wondering if Heidi was too fragile for my company.

"You've got our numbers," one said, holding onto Heidi's shoulder. "And Vancouver's got a great gay community."

"Oh God," I said. "She's going to a funeral, not a 'Save the Dykes' rally."

One of the girls stepped in front of me.

"It's O.K., Cynthia," Heidi said. Then she ushered me into her bedroom and

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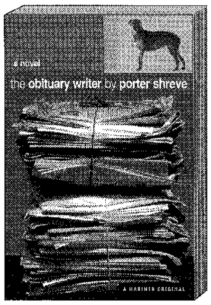

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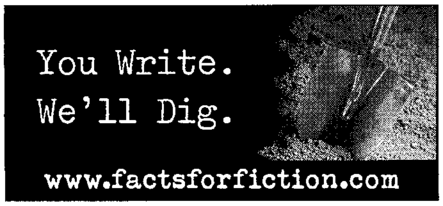
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closed the door. A suitcase was on her bed, half packed. She folded a polka-dotted T-shirt that was wrong for any occasion. "Why haven't you talked to me?" she said. "Why haven't you talked to me in two months?"

"I don't know," I said.

"You don't know," she said, each syllable seeped in sarcasm. "You don't know. Well, I know. You thought I was going to try to sleep with you."

"Try to? We slept together all winter!"

"Smelling your feet is not 'sleeping together.' You've got a lot to learn." She seemed thinner and meaner.

"So tell me," I said. "What can you show me that I need to learn?" But as soon as I said it I somehow knew that she still hadn't slept with anyone.

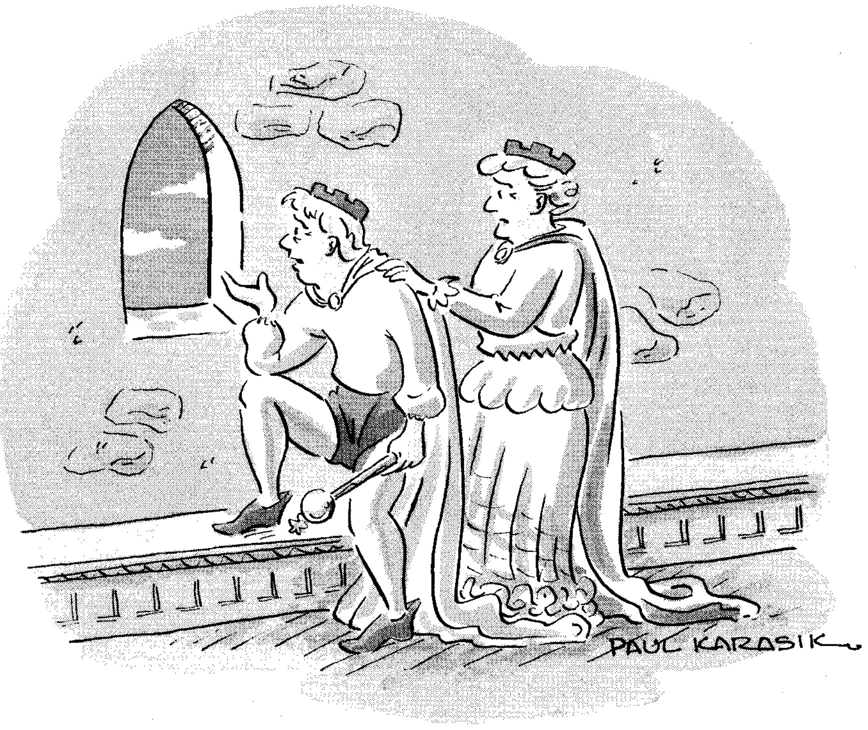
"Am I supposed to come over there and sweep your enraged self into my arms?" I said. "Like in the movies? Is this the part where we're both so mad we kiss each other?"

She shook her head and smiled weakly. "You don't get it," she said. "My mother is dead." She closed her suitcase, clicking shut the old-fashioned locks. "My mother is dead," she said again, this time reminding herself. She set the suitcase upright on the floor and sat on it. She looked like someone waiting for a train.

"Fine," I said. "And she's going to be dead for a long time." Though it sounded stupid, I felt good saying it. As though I had my own locks to click shut.

Heidi went to Vancouver for her mother's funeral. I didn't go. Instead, I went back to Baltimore and moved in with an aunt I barely knew. Every day was the same: I read and smoked outside my aunt's apartment, studying the row of hair salons across the street, where girls in denim cut-offs and tank tops would troop in and come out hours later, a flash of neon nails, coifs the color and sheen of patent leather. And every day I imagined visiting Heidi in Vancouver. Her house would not be large, but it would be clean. Flowery shrubs would line the walks. The Canadian wind would whip us about like pennants. I'd be visiting her at some vague time in the future, deliberately vague, for people like me, who realign past events to suit themselves. In that future time, you always have a chance to catch the groceries before they fall, your words can always be rewound and erased, rewritten and revised.

But once I imagined Heidi visiting me. There would be no psychiatrists or deans. No boys with nice shoes or flip cashiers. Just me in my single room. She would knock on the door and say, "Open up." ♦



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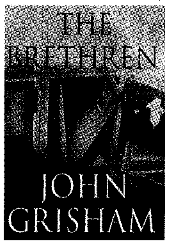

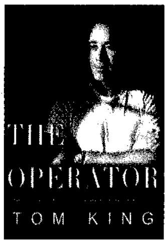

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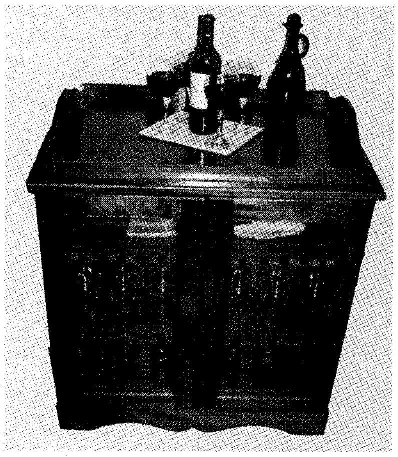

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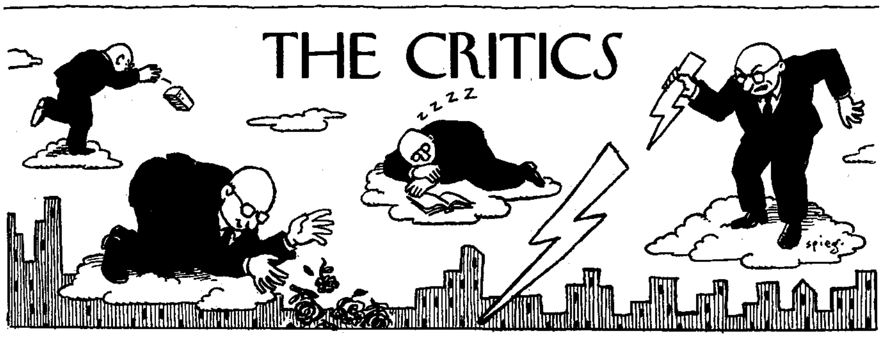

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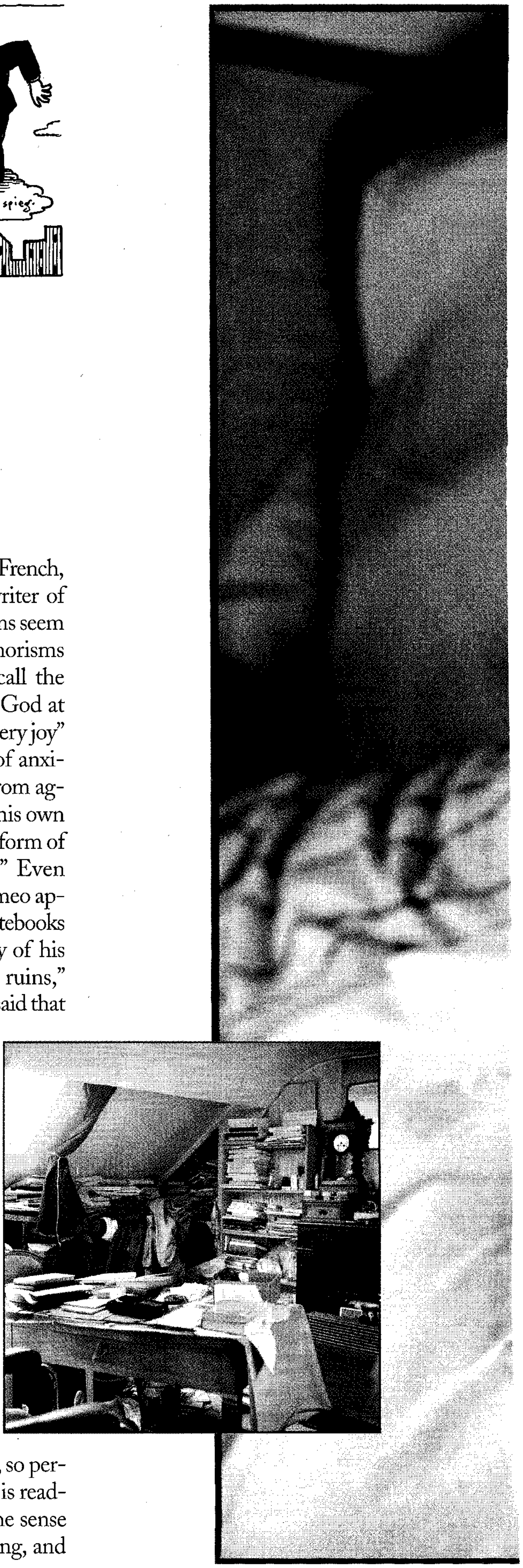
The civilizing power of thinking in French.

BY ADAM GOPNIK

E.M. Cioran, the French-Romanian wit and writer, was said before his death, in 1995, not to have slept for fifty years. This claim, the doctors and common sense agree, was a poetic exaggeration; he just worried too much to get a good night's rest. But his insistence on wearing his pajamas as a hair shirt, on making his insomnia absolute—a kind of symbolic state of mind—was, in a country as fond of absolutes as France, irresistible. He lived for years in a garret on the Rue de l'Odéon, near the Luxembourg Gardens. "All my adult life has been linked to this place," he said in old age, of the gardens. He would spend afternoons there, pacing the gravel walks amid the plane trees in an effort to wear himself out before another *nuit blanche*. When the gardens closed, as they do every day at dusk, the keeper's whistle driving everyone meekly out, he walked the streets that surround the park, meeting prostitutes and clochards and intellectuals—the last highbrow Parisian prowler.

He was always poor but could be found at the "best" Paris tables—salon tables, where he was valued for his jokes and his curiosity. The people who knew him and loved him said that, for all his pessimism, he was the most spontaneously funny man in France, with a natural comedian's gift for bringing other people to life as absurd characters. Although he didn't learn French until he was in his thirties, his reputation as a pure stylist, as a master of elegant French, is perhaps the highest of any writer of this century. Some of his aphorisms seem likely to live as long as any aphorisms can: "Every thought should recall the ruin of a smile" and "There is a God at the outset, if not at the end, of every joy" and "Skepticism is the elegance of anxiety" and "A civilization evolves from agriculture to paradox" and, about his own condition, "Insomnia is the only form of heroism compatible with bed." Even Beckett (who makes startling cameo appearances throughout Cioran's notebooks as "Sam") deferred to the quality of his despair. "I find shelter in your ruins," Sam told Cioran one day. It was said that they passed each other walking at twilight in the Luxembourg Gardens, and inclined bowed heads in greeting, two recognized masters of lowered eyes and expectations.

Outside of a prescient early essay by Susan Sontag, Cioran has been more rumor than reputation in America. But now Arcade has released—in a venture so high-minded, in these publishing days, that it is almost quixotic—five entire books of Cioran's writings and aphorisms in paperback, all in translations, by Richard Howard, so perfect that it is hard to believe one is reading a translation. Howard has the sense not to modernize Cioran's writing, and



E.M. Cioran in his apartment in

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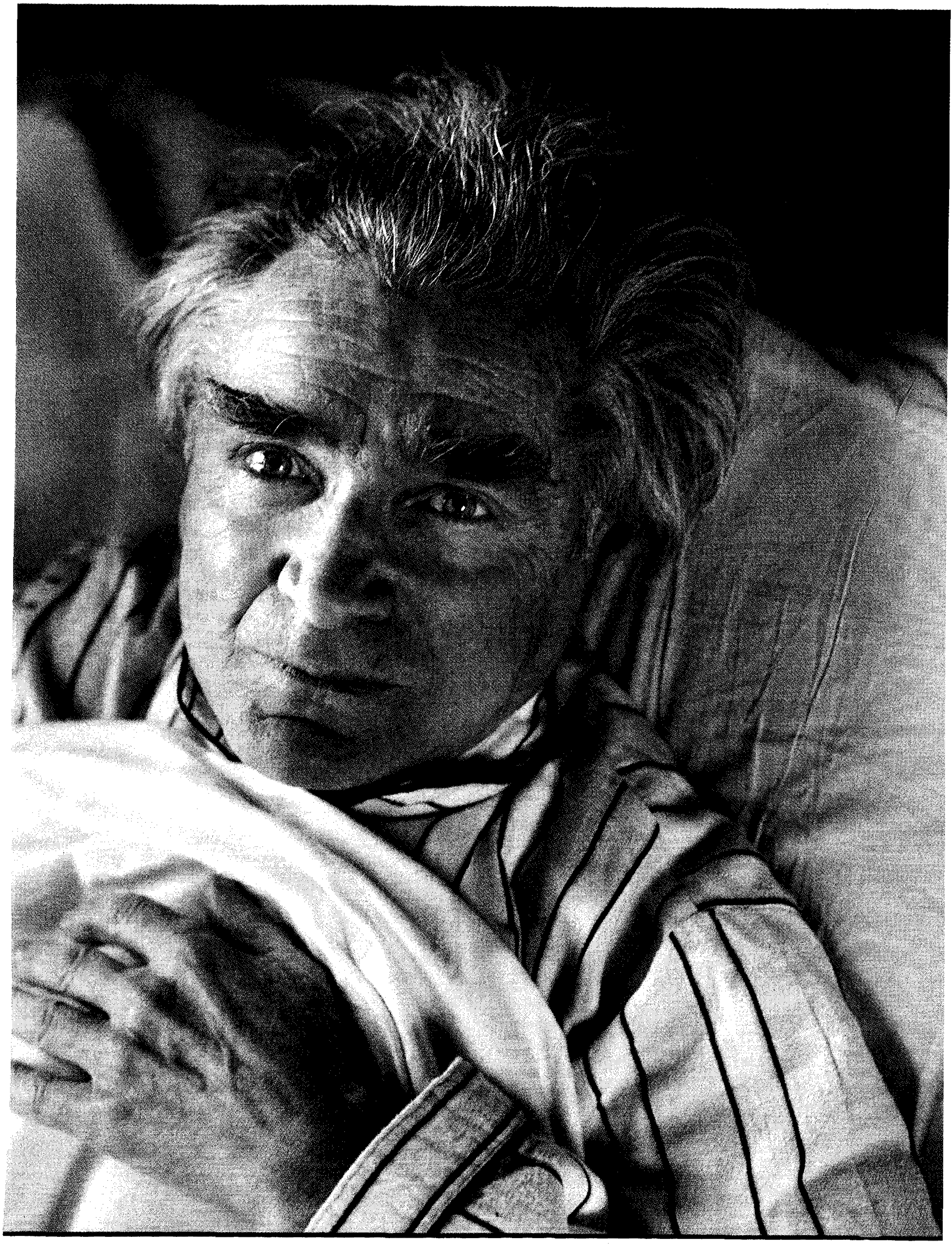
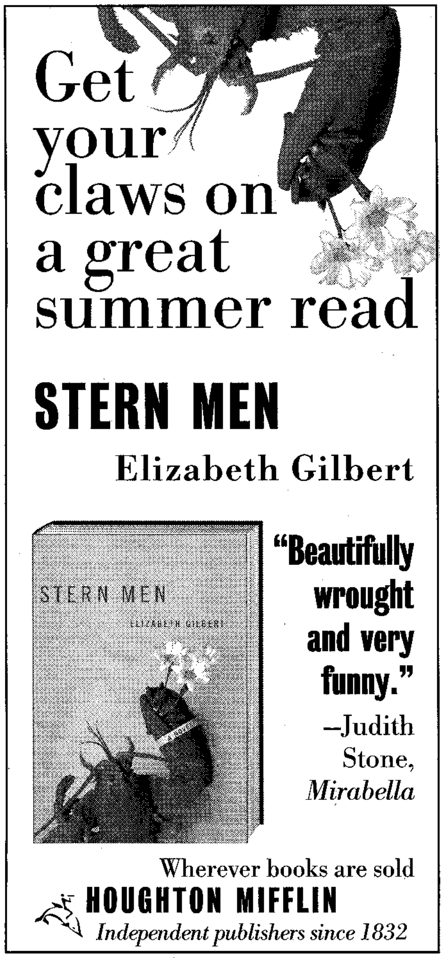


Paris in 1986: a man of abominable melancholy and obscure ironies, who made his insomnia a symbolic state of mind.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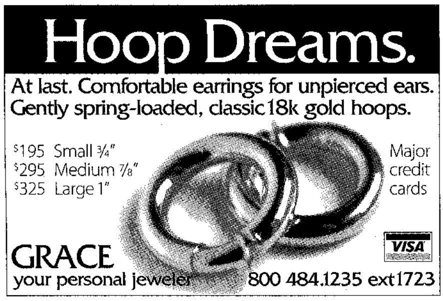
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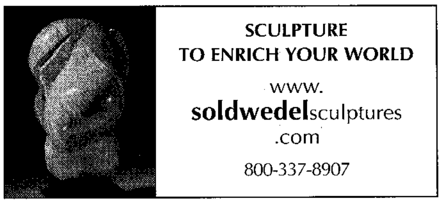
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captures the slightly stiff, man-in-a-dinner-jacket-on-the-edge-of-the-abyss glamour that clings to it.

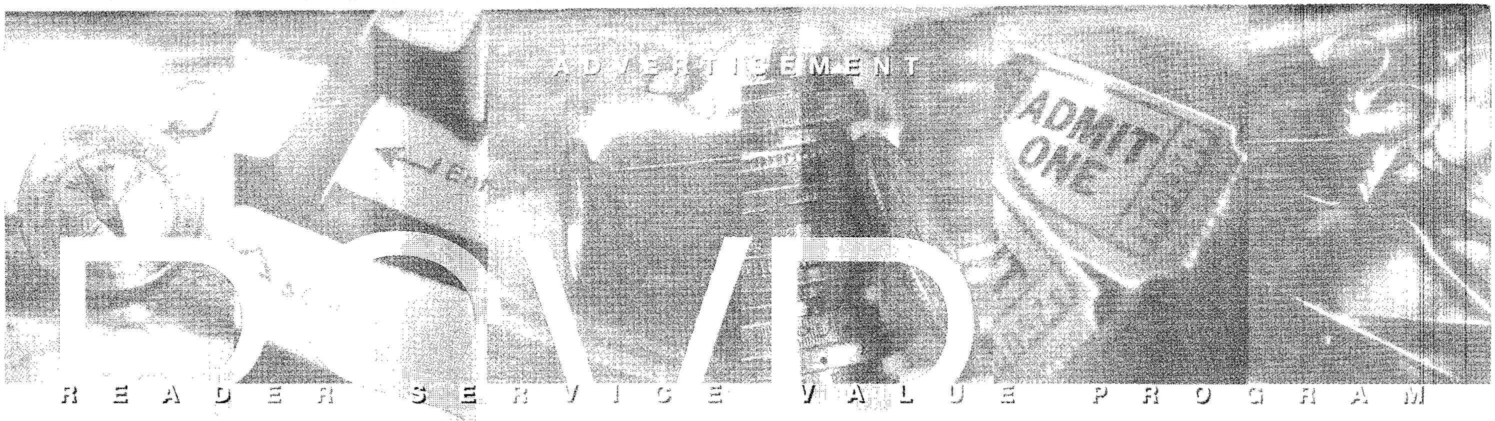
"Born in Romania in 1911, E. M. Cioran moved to Paris when he was twenty-six, and lived there until his death in 1995" is all the American publisher's blurb supplies. Yet with the publication, in 1997, of an essentially sympathetic, detailed account of Cioran's life by the literary journalist Patrice Bollon it became inescapably clear that Cioran had a lot to be sleepless about. Throughout the nineteen-thirties, before he emigrated to France, he was among the more vociferous far-right-wing voices in Romania, an explicit and, at times, shrill anti-Semite, and within the general vicinity of the murderous pro-Nazi militia called the Iron Guard—putting words into the mouths, if not ideas into the heads, of those who, in the Second World War, attempted to kill the Jewish population of Romania.

Cioran left Romania before the worst, or even the very bad, began, and it is possible—in Paris, it is almost compulsory—to read his fifty years of wit and sleeplessness as an act of expiation, and his choice of France, French, and the classical style as a rueful renunciation of the Romantic hysterical style that had led him so close to the Iron Guard. Yet there are those who see something suspect in the all-over extravagance of his despair, and see it as another evasion, with Fascism cast as one more failed illusion of modernity, like History or high-fidelity sound.

Some of the arguments of Cioran's "case" are by now dully familiar from the examples of Pound and De Man and all the other writers who were implicated in extreme-right-wing politics in the thirties and had ambiguous histories afterward. What makes Cioran's case odd is, first, the thoroughness of his remaking, and, second, the cast of his mind. The French Cioran is an attractive writer, a funny writer—a writer of worldly irony, a writer for bedside tables, in a way that Pound or De Man or even Céline does not even try to be. A love of Cioran creates an urge to press his writing into someone's hand, and is followed by an equal urge to pull it away, as poison, and, finally, a desire to sit down at a café and just go on reading it yourself—taking the poison in small doses, so to speak, and telling yourself that it is medicine. (But then homeopathic medicine is the favorite of Paris pharmacies.)

Like Dracula, another gentleman aphorist who couldn't sleep nights, Cioran came from Transylvania. "It was like living in another millennium—people coming down out of the mountains could be these ninth-century figures in an Art Deco setting," Saul Steinberg said, of his own Romanian boyhood. E. M. was born Emil Cioran in 1911, in a tiny Carpathian village called Rasinari. At the time, Rasinari was within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where a fantastic array of small nationalities were fighting for recognition. "How can you control yourself, master your behavior, when you come from a country where people howl at funerals?" Cioran wrote once. His notebooks from the nineteen-fifties refer to his gloomy father, who was the local Orthodox priest, and his fatalistic mother; when he suffered his first episodes of insomnia, in his twenties, she had a Mass said on his behalf, and the last note she sent to him ended, "Whatever people try to do, they'll regret it sooner or later." Although his father, a Romanian nationalist, was deported to Hungary during the First World War, it was the mixed-up, byzantine nature of his childhood terrain that stayed with Cioran longest. Moved by Hungarian Gypsy music, he one day wrote, "If Romania had not existed, I would have studied at Budapest and Vienna. I am a man of Central Europe, and I have in my blood all the fatalism of that unfortunate people. . . . This Gypsy music makes me mad with melancholy."

He went to Bucharest in the fall of 1928, and there he became caught up in student politics. Five years later, he left for Germany, and spent two murky years there as a student and a journalist. He was heavily influenced by Nietzsche, and was obsessed, like most of his generation, by the ridiculous "mediocrity" and confusion of Romania. He soon became intoxicated by the prewar brew of vitalism, undefined political extremism, and the more fervid forms of modernist art. By 1934, he was writing articles, in Romanian, praising Hitler, who had restored to his people the "mystical soul of the Germans, so opposed to the culture of style of the French." He wrote,



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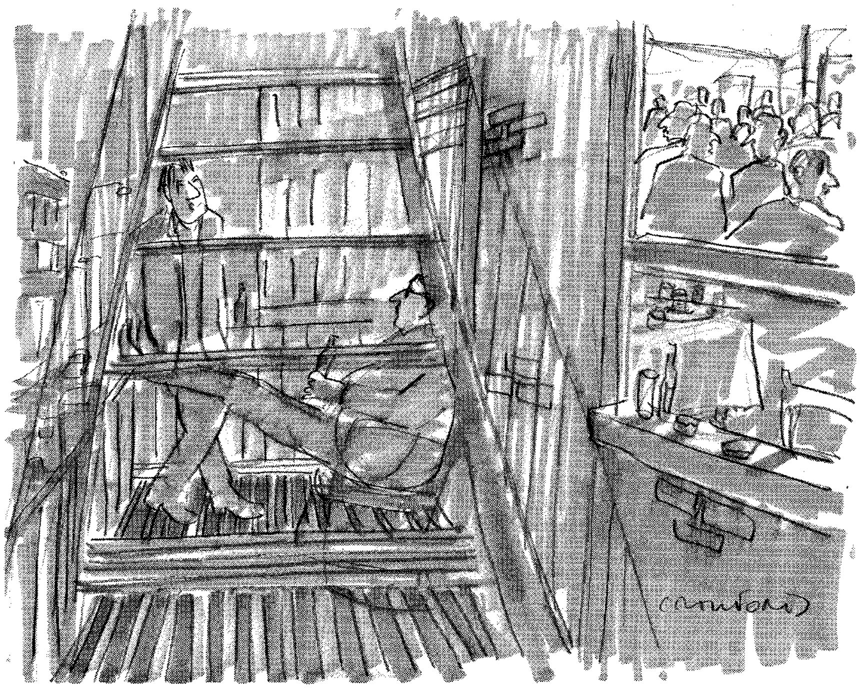

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"What pleases me in Hitler's followers is the cult of the irrational, the exaltation of vitality, the virile expansion of force, without critical distance, reserve, or control." His early writing, like that of so many other figures, particularly on the fringes of modernism outside France—the Futurists in Italy are the classic example—whipsawed between extreme left and extreme right in a blurred motion of intellectual ecstasy, an epileptic seizure of ideas. Energy and the life force were everything, destructive or creative.

On his return to Romania, he continued to see that cult as the only way of breaking the mediocre shell of a small country. The Iron Guard had begun, a few years earlier, as a militarized mass movement of the extreme right under the control of the demagogue Corneliu Codreanu. Cioran was at first critical of the Guards' coarseness, but he soon became infatuated with the integrity of their extremism. ("I am nearly always converted to the ideas that I have begun by attacking: the Iron Guard, alas!" he wrote ruefully, forty years later.) He wrote a political manifesto, "Schimbarea la Fata a Romaniei" ("Romania's Transfiguration"), an explicitly pro-Fascist polemic published in 1936 in Bucharest, which insisted that the second-rateness of Romania could be cured only in an exaltation of violence and vitalism, and that the chief obstacle to this was the cosmopolitan, melancholic Jews, whom he called "the most intelligent, the most gifted, and the most insolent people in the world." The Jews are a people of such fanatic gifts and genius that they strangle the national aspirations of all other nations around them, he suggested, and they do so through the curse of their "abominable melancholy and their ironies born of the obscurity of the ghetto."

Though Cioran himself was never in the Iron Guard, Bollon has shown that his views were taken up by, and identified with those of, the Guard. In 1937, Cioran won a scholarship to study in France, but he came home in 1940 to broadcast in favor of the pro-Hitler Fascist government (that he was asked to do so suggests that his voice counted) for having "returned honor to a nation of slaves, retaught a sense of pride to a spineless nation, given Romanian man a face."

Then he went back to Paris and stayed for good. It is possible that he had no choice—that he feared for his life in the sequence of massacres and counter-assassinations that filled Fascist

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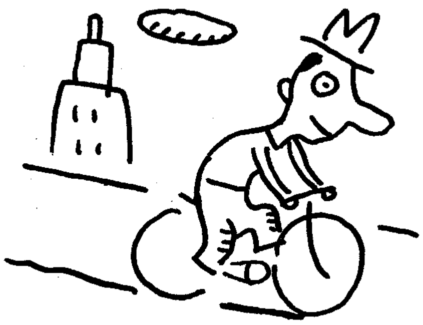
Romania. Bollon, who is not inclined to give Cioran undue slack, thinks that he left because he saw where things were heading. What is certain is that by 1949, when he published his first book in French, the "Précis de Décomposition" ("A Short History of Decay," as it is called in the Arcade series), the Germanophile, vitalist anti-Semite Emil Cioran had remade himself into E. M. Cioran: a man of abominable melancholy and obscure ironies, expressed in the most self-conscious manner of the civilization of style—an exponent of French culture writing in a skeptical Jewish manner.

Cioran's transformation into a French writer may be the most extraordinary skin-shedding in modern literary history. Nabokov and Conrad, the two touchstones of linguistic metamorphosis, changed their tongues but not their faces. Cioran in French was a new man. He himself seems to have felt that he was transformed (and saved) by the great Parisian trilogy, the three "F"s more powerful than Wilson's Four: fornication, food, and French. He got involved with a girl, another Romanian student, who showed him the more joyful uses of vitalism, and he learned to eat well. "In Romania," he said, "I ate like an animal. In Paris, I was made aware that to eat is a ritual, an act of civilization, almost a way of taking a philosophical position."

His decision to put himself to school in French had in it a touch of perverse genius, for he took as his models not the French moderns (whose work he knew well) or the French writers of the seventeenth century (some of whom, and Pascal in particular, he worshipped) but the minor society writers of the eighteenth century, especially Julie Lespinasse and Mme. Staal de Launay, the chambermaid of the Duchesse du Maine. There is no stranger picture in the history of modern letters than that of Cioran, toward the end of the Occupation, in 1944 and 1945, while the camps still killed and his old comrades finished their murderous pogroms, spending twelve-hour sessions in a room in the Fifth Arrondissement soberly mastering the sentimental style of the writers of the eighteenth century.



"Précis de Décomposition" and the other early books are feverish and dense. Whenever Cioran tries to write for more than a page, he descends into a kind of abstract vaporing, and even Richard Howard's skills can't save the argument from sounding like plain gibberish: "The universalization of awakening, fruit of lucidity, itself fruit of the erosion of reflexes, is the sign of emancipation in the order of the mind and of capitulation in the order of action, of history, in fact, itself no more than an acknowledgment of collapse: as soon as we turn our eyes upon history, we are in the situation of a dismayed spectator."

But even in these books shining aphorisms can be fished out of the rhetorical mud—the one about civilization and agriculture comes from 1947. Then, in the nineteen-fifties, the classic Cioran emerged, publishing books of compressed epigrams and aphorisms and fragments torn from life. With the two books of aphorisms, one from 1973, translated in the Arcade editions as "The Trouble with Being Born" and "The Temptation to Exist," in particular, he was acknowledged, with Valéry, as a modern master of *bien écrit*, or "well-written," stylish French.

Cioran's high rating in France comes at a moment when the language itself is embattled by the growth of the English-speaking imperium that stretches from Brisbane to Vancouver. He seems living proof of its emollient qualities—of the intrinsically civilizing qualities of thinking in French. (You see, the implicit argument runs in Paris, just speaking the language and eating the food can turn you from a raving provincial Nazi to a melancholic gentleman-philosopher.) This is appealing, and not too far from Cioran's own view. "It is just possible to imagine God speaking French, but never Christ," he wrote. "His words do not function in a language so ill at ease in the naïve or the sublime." He was clearly glad to get the naïve and the sublime—and, with his dad in mind, even

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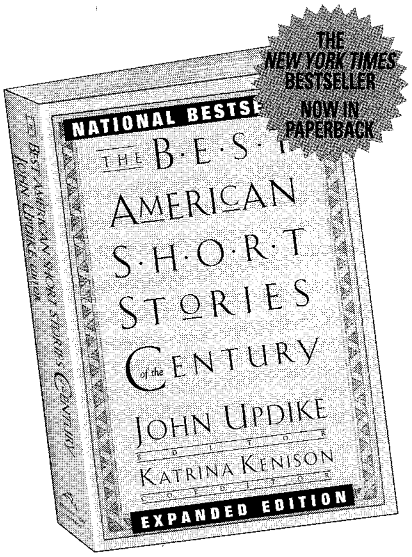

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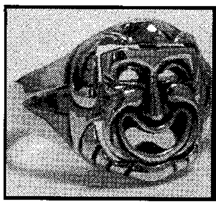

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the Christian—out of his own system.

Yet the notion of French as somehow inherently lucid and civilized is obviously false; there's as much naïve (and hysterical) writing in French as there is in any other language. The excellence of Cioran's writing in French more probably arrives because it is his second language, and so hard-won. We breathe in our first language, and swim in our second. The effort of swimming—the effortful rising up and down again and again, head into the water, head back out, take a breath, expel it—means that, no matter how skilled we become, the work is always there and, with it, a saving self-consciousness. In Romanian, Cioran was a free, even a wild, stylist, hyperventilating; in French, he became a pointillist, ready to die for a comma. You can speak or write a second language well or badly, but never heedlessly. He understood this himself: "It is my voice, my transeuropean 'r's, that have impelled me by reaction to take some care with what I write and to make myself more or less worthy of an idiom I mistreat each time I open my mouth." On another occasion, he said, with a bit of exasperation, "To change languages is to write a love letter with a dictionary"; but he was better off having to look up his words. In any case, his mature writing has the quality less of a love letter than of a ransom note, with each letter found and jaggedly cut out. (A lovely instance of Cioran's evolution toward a ransom-note style: the early "There is so much crime and poetry in Shakespeare that his dramas seemed conceived by a mad rose" becomes, twelve years later, "Shakespeare: rendezvous of a rose and a hatchet.")

In fact, there are certain stretches where you feel that Cioran has learned his lessons too well, and that the French manner of antinomies has become a self-powered sewing machine. "The fact that life has no meaning is a reason to live—moreover, the only one," or "Everything that happens is at once natural and inconceivable": these aphorisms of Cioran's are the kind of thing you suspect he could have written in his sleep, if he'd had any.

Cioran's emergence as a prose master in French does say something about French in the twentieth century. French may not be inherently civilized, but it continues to have an accepted standard of style. "*Bien écrit*" in France means something much more precise than "well written" does in English. If something is *bien écrit*, you can be confident that it is not just grammatically correct but grammatically rich, with a nod to old-fashioned tenses; that it is fluent without being concrete; and that it is one and a half shades more purple than would be acceptable in English. There have been similar standards of *bien écrit* in English—for almost a hundred and fifty years, to say that something was well written in English meant that it sounded like Addison, middling mandarin, and for about fifty happy years in America "well written" meant like E. B. White, highly particularized, and celebratory or plaintive in tone—but now, sadly, "well written" means whatever you want it to mean. In France, it continues to be a category with a socially agreed-upon meaning. The Académie Française likes to take credit, but the Académie is really a kind of joke, even in Paris, and the real reason for the persistence of a common standard of fine writing is that French journalists still think of themselves as writers first (they certainly don't see themselves as reporters), and aspire to an easily recognized "higher" standard. To have a house style you have to have a house. Cioran, in his notebooks, remarks with awe and pleasure on meeting a ten-year-old French boy who, in his homework, wrote a lengthy note to his teacher explaining why he was using the impersonal "*on*" (one goes, one does) rather than the first person "*je*" (I go, I do).

Cioran's genius was to make a new style that combined two classic French forms: the seventeenth-century aphorism—the finished, pregnant, polished summing up that encloses an entire view of life in a phrase—and the nineteenth-century romantic fragment, the broken-off bit that longs for the no longer obtainable whole. He takes Baudelaire's walks in Pascal's shoes, foundering between an epigram and a sigh. His best lines are at once finished sentences that leave you with the feeling that there is nothing left to say, and broken phrases that leave you with the feeling that there is no point left in speaking. "I sought in doubt a remedy for anxiety. The remedy ended by making common cause with the disease." "The essential often appears

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at the end of a long conversation. The great truths are spoken on the doorstep." "It is not easy to acquire a neurosis; should you succeed, you possess a fortune which everything favors: victories as well as defeats." "No one should try to live if he has not completed his training as a victim." Sometimes he could even be up there with Kafka: "Visit from a painter who describes how, calling one evening on a blind man and finding him alone in the dark, he could not keep from pitying him and asking him if existence was endurable without light. '*You don't know what you're missing*' was the blind man's answer."

Of course, Cioran didn't just "write French"; he used the language to make statements and contend for ideas. What were they? It's here that a divide opens between those of his admirers who see him as a major philosopher and those of us who see him as a kind of highbrow comedian. His admirers insist that he "avoided closure," but though the ideas are not thought through, or argued out, this is not because they are so complex; it's because they are so monotonous. The moral of all his books is, essentially, the cry of the Get-Ready Man, who was there when Thurber was a boy in Columbus (see "My Life and Hard Times"), and who went around in his car hollering, "Get Ready! Get Read-y! The Worllld Is Coming to an End!" Cioran is the Get-Ready Man of the Luxembourg Gardens. The death of religion, of foundations, means the decay of the idea of the human; the manias of the twentieth century, left and right, are symptoms of an irretrievable breakdown. "The truth is that everything is rotten from the beginning. I see in each child a future Richard III," he wrote. Now the rot has spread, and Western civilization is at an end. "Having governed two hemispheres, the West is now becoming their laughingstock: subtle specters, end of the line in the literal sense, doomed to the status of pariahs, of flabby and faltering slaves, a status which perhaps the Russians will escape"—this was written in 1971—"those *last* White Men. Because they still have some pride," and, a few pages later, in the same book, "Drawn and Quartered": "Everything indicates that humanity is going downhill. . . . It is manifest that man has given the best of himself, and

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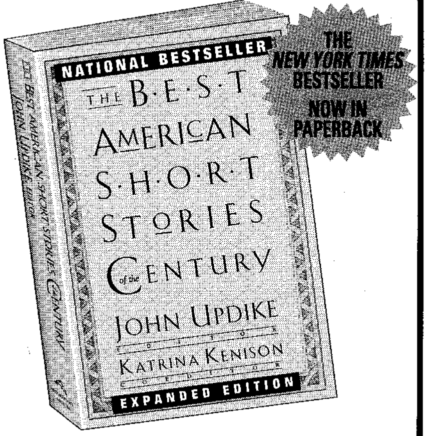
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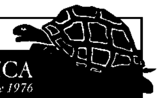

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that even if we were to witness the emergence of other civilizations, they would certainly not be worth the ancient ones, nor even the modern ones, not counting the fact that they could not avoid the contagion of the end."

Yet the single-mindedness of Cioran's despair is the engine of his humor. Since everyone is going to hell in a handbasket, there's no point in getting worked up about any particular case. Things slide by, get their ironic comment, almost always smart, occasionally brilliantly funny: "Know thyself. One has never heard expressed so briefly what it is to be damned." On the other hand, the universality of his despair makes him think that he knows it all already, and therefore doesn't have to look around to see what might be new. Although his notebooks, only recently published, are in many respects his best work, even they exist in a surprising void of particulars. Things do happen: he goes to the Louvre, he walks at night, once in a while he visits the theatre, and always, always he listens to Bach. ("Of the things that have happened to me on earth, meeting Bach is the most important," he wrote, and "When I hear Bach, I believe.") But, apart from music, the things of the world are perceived but not really experienced. What is felt is not the facts of life but fixed ideas about existence. There are neither motorcars nor cafés nor jet planes nor Algeria nor even movies—a single saxophone alone can be found, wailing, on page 279 of the notebooks. (And then, perhaps, he was thinking of the late-nineteenth-century symphonic saxophone, not of Lester Young or Coleman Hawkins.)

What the completeness of despair gains for Cioran in insouciance it loses for him in moral seriousness. He can't look hard at a problem; he just switches the sentences around. He returned to the subject of the Jews, for instance, in the "Précis," but the approach is exactly the same as it was before the war, with the moral plus and minus signs mechanically altered. Postwar, the Jews are, by virtue of their isolation, still Different, the Other, but now it is their Difference, their Otherness, their resistance to assimilation, that makes them great. "To be called a deicide is the most flattering insult that can be addressed to an individual or a people." They remain an object of metaphysical inquiry, rather than just people. His admirers would like to insist that his infatuation with irrationalism was purged by the experiences of the war. But he didn't see Auschwitz and despair. He despaired as a way of not seeing Auschwitz. If existence itself is poisoned, if modern civilization in all its forms is headed toward the apocalyptic, if all of us are implicated in the suicide of the species, then the details of who, exactly, killed whom, when, and why are the banal preoccupation of bourgeois moralists.

What really strikes the reader of Cioran is the essential continuity between the two ends of his work, young and old. The cult of the irrational can run only faster than reason or slower than life. It can try to outpace the quotidian rhythm of the world, with its doubts and nuances and scruples and compromises, and insist, as Cioran did at first, that all we need is change, revolution, transformation, an ecstasy of destructive vitality. Or it can retreat into a passive position of resignation, as Cioran did afterward: nothing ever changed, nothing ever will.

Yet, if Cioran is not a thinker of consequence, his place as a major writer seems fairly won. His genius was not argumentative but dramatic. What is touching and funny, and most appealing in Cioran is not the originality of his thought but the way that, right under the smooth French aphoristic surface, one feels an anxious comedian at work. Nonexistence can become as tangible as a walk in the Luxembourg Gardens, just one of the things you face each day.

Even if Cioran's history is dubious, his wisdoms limited, and his temperament often too meanly querulous, the gaiety of his despair is somehow heartening. One of his admirers calls him our "guide to the void." But a void, by its nature, won't have details, and therefore won't have a map. All you can do is send off flares in the darkness. Cioran does that, even if sometimes the flares look suspiciously like fireworks—*feu d'artifices*, as the nice French phrase has it. He was the last literary figure in the line that descends from Baudelaire, the last to walk the streets of Paris with the yearnings and some of the purity of purpose of an ornery hermit-saint. These days, without his kind, the city can seem asleep. ♦

FIRST FICTIONS

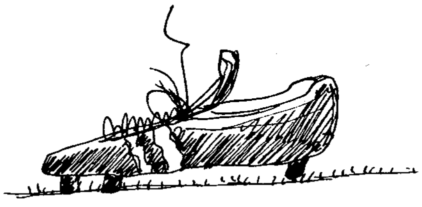
White Teeth, *by Zadie Smith (Random House; $24.95).* The two marriages that anchor Smith's début novel could not, on the surface, be more different. Archie Jones is a divorced, ineffectual white English bloke who falls impulsively for the beautiful Jamaican Clara. And Samad Iqbal is an obstinate Bengali (but also undeniably English) bloke who submits to an arranged union with the bellicose Alsana. Yet beneath the superficial differences are abiding similarities: Archie and Samad are old Army buddies, and Clara and Alsana younger wives who quickly become mothers. With a deft comic touch and a rambling narrative style that favors subplot and digression, Smith tracks these two couples, and the products of their coupling, as they career through contemporary North London. In this multiracial novel of brilliantly hued setups and vivid dialogue what jumps out at you is not the politics of color but the colors themselves.

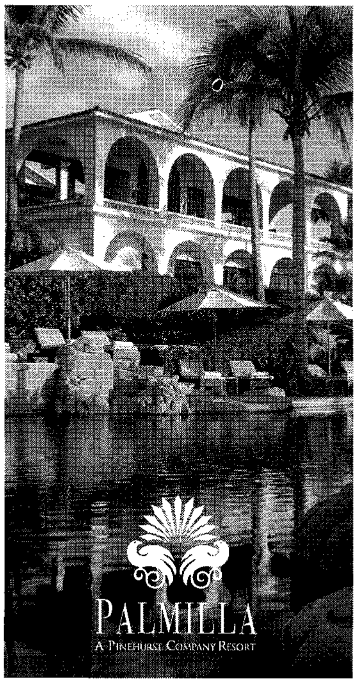
Madame, *by Antoni Libera, translated from the Polish by Agnieszka Kolakowska (Farrar, Straus & Giroux; $26).* The hero of this excellent novel is a high-school student, trying to fulfill his romantic destiny in the decidedly unromantic world of the Communist Polish People's Republic. His primary exertion is to fall hopelessly in love with his beautiful French teacher, Madame, a cold, indomitable cipher whom he woos with an essay about astrological myths and an impeccable French accent. As the boy investigates his beloved's complicated past with a particularly earnest and endearing deviousness, he is forced to make sense of the social and political myths he has inherited.

The Fundamentals of Play, *by Caitlin Macy (Random House; $24.95).* Every so often, a first novel becomes the touchstone of a generation; this one probably won't, but Macy is such an ambitious and graceful writer that one keeps rooting for her, even when her supple paragraphs don't propel us much of anywhere. The setting is New York in the early nineties, and the players—mostly male—are exquisitely bred, directionless preppies, poking their toes into the gentlemen's professions of finance and publishing, savoring complicated cocktails at gentlemen's clubs, dreaming gentlemen's dreams. Macy's eye for the sparks that fly when her honed and not so honed sensibilities rub together is nearly unerring, and it's hard to imagine anyone more capable of writing, eventually, the quintessential chronicle that this novel is straining to become.

Chang and Eng, *by Darin Strauss (Dutton; $23.95).* Chang and Eng Bunker—conjoined brothers born on the Mekong delta whose nineteenth-century renown added the term "Siamese twins" to the medical lexicon—have long been a familiar entry in the "Guinness Book of World Records." Telling their story from Eng's point of view, Strauss's novel is as lyrical as it is daring, charting the brothers' fantastic journey from imprisonment in the Siamese palace, through Dickensian performances at freak shows in London and New York, to antebellum North Carolina, where marriage to a pair of sisters brings them as close to—and as painfully far from—normal life as they will get.

The Question of Bruno, *by Aleksandar Hemon (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday; $22.95).* The Yugoslavian-born author came to the United States on vacation, but was forced to stay when his country erupted in war. In this collection of stories, political reality is driven into everyday life like a wedge or—just as often—like a knife. The most straightforward pieces benefit immensely from the fact that English is not Hemon's native language. Like Conrad's, his prose often makes the most of emphatically discordant notes: an initially incongruous word comes to seem a perfect choice.





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BOOKS

FAMILY ROMANCE

Like father, like son.

BY JOAN ACOCELLA

Martin Amis, the author of "London Fields" and "The Information," logomaniac chronicler of the modern city—of the scum, the bums, the parks where the children mix with the pedophiles—has written a memoir, "Experience" (Talk Miramax; $23.95). Its title is probably taken from a remark that Amis tells us his father, Kingsley, made upon the bust-up of his second marriage: "Well, it's all experience, though it's a pity there had to be so much of it." In the years 1994 and 1995—as English readers do not have to be told but Americans might—Martin Amis, too, unloaded a heavy cargo of experience. For "The Information," he demanded that his agent, Pat Kavanagh, get him an advance of half a million pounds. When she came up short, he turned the job over to Andrew Wylie, of New York, famous for holding publishers by the short hairs. Had Amis been an American, this story would have merited no more than a paragraph or two in the *Times'* "Making Books" column, but in London, where writers are more likely to be public figures, and where the literary press is far more combative than here (they regard us as sissies), it was a major scandal, retailed in the newspapers for weeks.

Nor was changing agents the only charge against Amis, for in doing so he forfeited one of his best friends, Julian Barnes, who is Kavanagh's husband. But forget friends. The year before, Amis had left his wife and two sons for a younger woman, the American writer Isabel Fonseca, and soon afterward, in New York, he began a series of dental repairs, for which he reportedly paid twenty thousand dollars. American agent, American woman, American *dentist:* Amis was crucified (his word) in the press for having gone over to the other side, to the transatlantic crime pit—cash, sex, cosmetics.

That was not the end of it. One night in 1973 Amis's cousin, a twenty-one-year-old student named Lucy Partington, was dropped off by a friend at a suburban bus station and never seen again. No one knew what had happened to her. Then, in 1994, the English police finally arrested a man named Frederick West and found, in the places where he had stowed them, the remains of a dozen girls, among them Lucy Partington, who had been decapitated and dismembered. While that was being headlined in the press, Amis's adored father began dying. It is wrong to bring in Kingsley's death last—it is the most important event in the book—but it happened last. After the death, Eric Jacobs, Kingsley's biographer, wrote a piece on him so crude and cold, in the opinion of the Amis family, that they fired him as the editor of Kingsley's letters. This prompted a new scandal, with Martin again cast as a villain.

That two-year *saison en enfer* is unquestionably part of the reason Amis has chosen, at the early age of fifty, to write a memoir. He means to defend himself. Some of his troubles were not his fault, but others, such as his divorce, were. All are grouped together and marked down as "experience." At times we see Amis feeling the weight of his responsibility:

> I said to myself, Look at it: Look at what you've done. There is the rented car . . . in which you will drive alone to Logan. There is your wife, crying in the drive. Beyond her are your boys on the patch of grass, with that zoo of theirs—the frogs, the turtles.

But to comfort himself he had another man who walked out on his wife and children for a new woman: Kingsley. "Only to him could I talk about what I was doing to my children. Because he had done it to me."

Apart from the "experience" argument, Amis's other ground of appeal is the extent to which he suffered not by his own hand. A great deal is made of Lucy, and, sadly—because his heart was no doubt in it—it is a bad job, part Beatrix Potter (we hear about Lucy's pet mouse, Snowy), part pulpit: Lucy's death is "what happens when darkness meets light . . .

A two-year saison en enfer is unquestionably part of the reason Martin Amis has chosen, at the age of fifty, to write a memoir.

when utter godlessness meets purity of spirit." Amis says at the beginning of the book that he means "to speak, for once, without artifice." But he is a novelist; he cannot speak, or in any case write, without artifice. At one point, when he is at the dentist's, having the lead apron put over him, he says, "I always think of my cousin Lucy when I am being X-rayed, when I am being restrained; and I always think of her whenever I find myself in church." A number of English reviewers have protested Amis's discussing Lucy's sufferings in the context of his dental trials. The association makes perfect sense to me. What I question is the church, a place where we find Amis but rarely in this volume. He tells us later that his Aunt Miggy, Lucy's mother, hesitated to give him permission to write about Lucy, and that he finally persuaded her. Snowy and the church are there for Aunt Miggy, I think. But Lucy is not the only object of sentimentality. In general, Amis does poorly with women in this book. There is some constraint; he doesn't sound like himself.

On the other hand, when he gets to that dental work, he is home free. Even for an Englishman, Amis had terrible teeth. Not only did all of them have to be pulled out and replaced by implants; there was also a tumor in his chin that had to be removed, after which the lower jaw had to be rebuilt. He spends many pages describing this, and meditating on it. (In the index, under "dental problems," there

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are *twenty-six* sub-entries, including "sexual potency and," "suicide and," "war effort and.") Here is the moment when the uppers are extracted:

> A further San Andreas of wrenching and tearing—of ecstatic sundering.
> —Wait. Your teeth are still there.
> I cannot control my tongue which dances up to meet the dangling bridge. Something light drops on it—a piece of severed root—and slithers off sideways. The aromatic hands of Mike Szabatura [the dentist] are now exerting decisive force. And it is gone—the gory remnant whisked from sight like some terrible misadventure from the Delivery Room.

But what is good, and Amis-like, about the passages on the teeth is not so much their linguistic exuberance as their symbolic force. No doubt out of courtesy to his family, Amis never really discusses the first marriage: how it came apart, what his boys thought of him. The dental calvary is, I believe, his symbol for that. The pain, the disfigurement, the shame, the way, when he had a temporary plate, his sons turned away from him, because he looked different to them: here, if I'm not mistaken, we find out what the divorce was like.

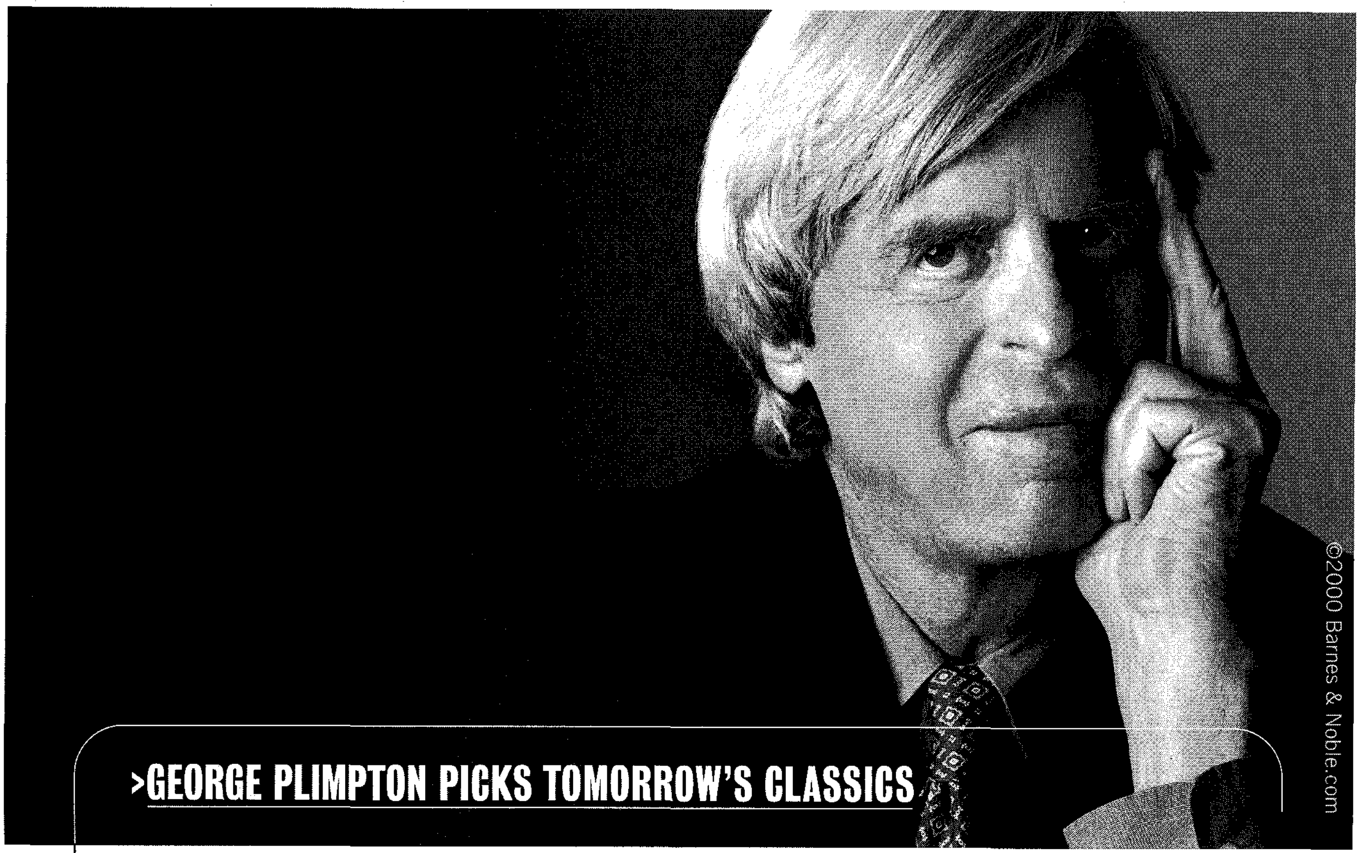
Strange, you may say, to have this talk of seepages and bloody Kleenexes stand for the anguish of a family's dissolution, but there you have it: Amis's world—its irony, its grotesquerie, its emotional indirection. Many people have complained about the coldness of feeling in Amis's novels—how much he cackles over the world's ugliness, how little sympathy he shows for his characters. For those people, there is a surprise in this book: Amis's portrayal of his father, a characterization almost Shakespearean in its variety, shading, clearheadedness, generosity. Kingsley Amis was no picnic. That his two wives took as long as they did to leave him is a miracle. He "used to *live* for adultery," Martin writes, and he was drunk every night. As readers of his novels know, his views were of the flinty variety. He thought nuclear weapons a blessing. He claimed that marijuana was a Communist plot to weaken the American forces in Vietnam. He was full of fears: couldn't drive, couldn't stay in a house alone after dark. When he went up to his study each morning, he wore a mask of utter suffering, Martin says, for every day he feared he would pick up his pen "and there'd be nothing. There'd be nothing left." He was terrified of death, had nightmares about it. Martin remembers hearing his "horrified gasps" in the night. Then:

> My mother would lead him to my room. The light came on. My parents approached and sat. I was asked to talk about my day, school, the games I had played. He listened feebly but lovingly, admiringly. . . . In the morning I talked to my mother and she was very straight. "It calms him down because he knows he can't be frightened in front of you." Frightened of what? "He dreams he is leaving his body." It made me feel important—up late, holding the floor, curing a grown man: my father. It bonded us.

There was more that bonded them, for Kingsley was actually wonderful: tenderhearted (when he had to spank his boys, he cried), unostentatiously loving, a seeker and giver of good times, and, as his novels attest, endlessly funny. He had erotic dreams about the Queen. Martin relates a conversation:

> K: I had another dream about Corky last night. M: What happens in these Corky dreams of yours? . . . K: Oh nothing much. I kiss her a bit and say something like "Come on, let's go off somewhere." And she just says things like "Kingsley, I can't" or "No, Kingsley, we mustn't."

Kingsley never encouraged his son to write, and didn't like—or, as time passed, read—much of what Martin wrote. There is a story that when, in Martin's novel "Money," Kingsley came across a character named Martin Amis, he threw the book across the room. This was entirely expectable, Martin told an interviewer, "because I had broken the contract between writer and reader, which says: no messing about; no fooling with the reality level." That's the contract of realism. Martin is not a realist but a postmodernist, and, to hear him tell it, there was no reason his father should have liked the new product. But it seems unquestionable that it was partly Martin's love for his father that made him choose to be a novelist. Once he did, the bond between the two men, so strong before, became utterly fast. ("I am you and you are me," Martin says to Kingsley's ghost after his death.) And whatever Kingsley thought of Martin's novels, he was a good model for a young writer. Frightened or not, he produced close to fifty books. As much as Martin—and that's obviously where Martin got it—he was an ardent lover of the English language. He had a cult of the Concise Oxford Dictionary: "he would



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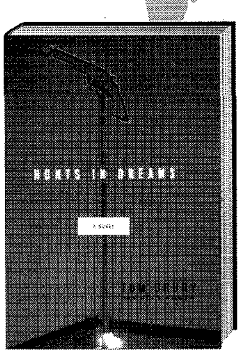

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sometimes pat and even stroke the squat black book, as if it were one of his cats."

Kingsley's death was preceded by a long, messy decline:

> In his sixties my father became a martyr to IBS, or Irritable Bowel Syndrome. . . . Sometimes I had to drive him around because he feared having a mishap in a taxi. His condition and his paranoia were at their worst when he was summoned to Buckingham Palace to receive his knighthood from the Queen. KA had his doctor lay down a firewall of Imodium, and there was some doubt, afterwards, whether he would ever again go to the toilet.

Nor could Kingsley hold his liquor anymore. He fell all the time. After his second wife left him, his first wife—Martin's mother, Hilary—moved back in with him *with her husband*, Ali: a there'll-always-be-an-England arrangement that lasted fifteen years, until Kingsley's death. They had their hands full. According to Hilary, some of Kingsley's drunken collapses "sounded like a chest-of-drawers jettisoned from an aeroplane. 'Absolutely deafening. But you're not supposed to mention it. It happens so often that we don't even go up. Unless he's wedged. Then he bangs on the floor and I send Ali.' " Eventually, he could no longer write. Still, he would drag the drink-logged body to the desk, and what he typed was just the word "seagulls" over and over. Martin meditates on this:

> Now I live on my father's street, and seagulls, in the temperate months, are part of my daily life. Attracted by the nearby canals, they fill the sky above Regent's Park Road. Plump, cumbersome and pompous, they flock to the shitlashed terrace outside my study. All day they honk and shriek, practising on their tenpee harmonicas, their warped kazoos.

He can see why Kingsley wrote "seagulls." I am you.

"Experience" is not ordered chronologically. What happens, chapter by chapter, is that a subject is let out of the bag—dentistry, women, whatever—and, like a bird, wheels and flies, picking up this and that bit of material, from whatever point in time, and then at last alights, with a quiet little plop. The great points are made not symphonically but by accumulation, as in a Symbolist poem. (That makes the book sound difficult. It's not. It's much easier to read than Martin's novels. Can anyone tell me what happened to Marco at the end of "The Information"?) The technique works wonderfully, and nowhere better than with Kingsley's death. Martin does it twice: a chapter in the middle and a chapter at the end, and, in between, a thousand associations. By the time he gets to the brute fact, the final event, so much richness has piled up that he can afford austerity: realism, comedy. He and his brother meet at the hospital, but before they go up they decide to have a cigarette, and while they're smoking in the sunshine their father dies. They get upstairs and are told that it's over. But wait: "In Kingsley's bed a sheeted figure thrashed (they're killing him!)." No, never mind, it's a new patient:

> Our father lay further in, on the other side of the screens, which I now parted. Instant chemistry of death, already changing him from alkaline to acid. And the death colours, greens and indigos, like dyes of caste, so much more garish than the colours of life. As if to ward something off, his right hand was raised (contorted, mottled), with the plastic nametag on its wrist.

In the next chapter comes the consolation: a year after Kingsley's death, Martin's daughter is born.

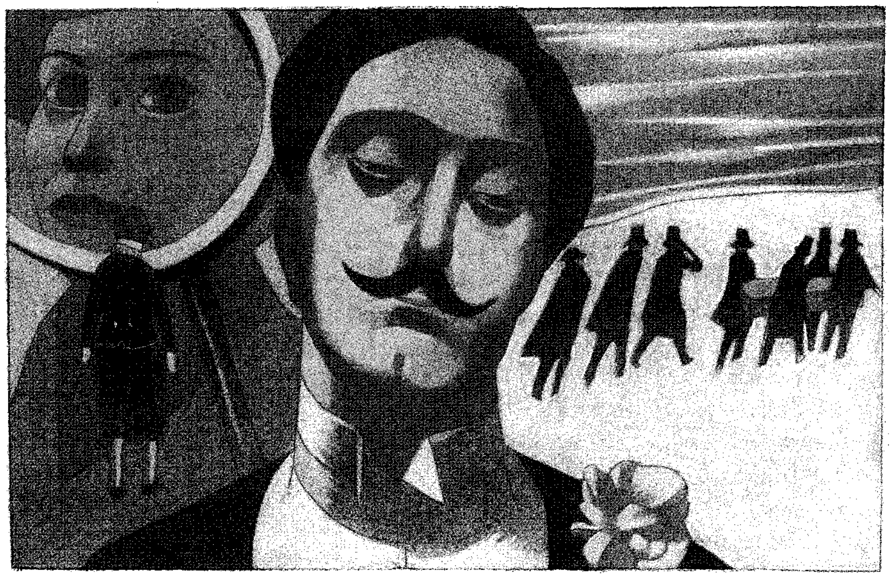
That should have been the end of the book. It isn't. It's followed by three appendices: one on Auschwitz, of all things; one on the Eric Jacobs affair; one a letter to Aunt Miggy saying he hopes he did O.K. with Lucy. All of them should have been deleted. They only remind us of what was going on at the beginning of this book: that Martin was defending himself. After the portrait of Kingsley, he doesn't have to. At one point, he says that as he is writing he has two memories of Kingsley's face. In one, Kingsley has just had a terrible fight with his second wife. In the other, he has just spanked the child Martin for some offense, then turned to the window, then turned back. In both cases, the face is the same: "childish, softly frowning, entering a plea for mitigation, for leniency, asking for things to be seen in a kinder light." Kingsley was an "old devil." You can't be an old devil anymore. Our politics don't allow it, thank God. But that same look of Kingsley's, in a more self-conscious version, is the look on the face of this book. Martin Amis may, in his life, have destroyed some loves, but in this book he has memorialized and thus created—in words, in "artifice"—another. That is his plea of mitigation, and in the end it works. ◆

THE CURRENT CINEMA

TELLING TIME

The scandals and satisfactions of the Proustian beau monde.

BY ANTHONY LANE



Marcello Mazzarella as the author in Raoul Ruiz's "Time Regained." If you have never read the novel, the movie will be a mystery, and that is exactly as it should be.

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How do you film Proust? What would an accurate film of "In Search of Lost Time" look like? More to the point, what would it *smell* like? Here was a man who could be prompted, by the fleeting aroma of gasoline, to recall "cornflowers, poppies, and red clover"; short of pumping compound scents into the movie theatre, how do you honor a moment like that? The truth is that a true Proust movie would last for days, even months; the projectionist would need to switch nimbly from blazing CinemaScope to the thin, seedy viewing slots familiar to frequenters of peepshows; above all, we would require the revival of Sensurround—rustiest of gimmicks, long left to rot with the disaster flicks that it once adorned, but ideal, surely, for those quakes of jealousy and tidal surges of desire that the author, ever generous with his emotions, so wanted us to share.

But life is short, so we will have to make do with Raoul Ruiz's "Time Regained." In the event, this is no hardship, since the film is mostly on target: serene but anxious, gallant but bitchy, quick to freeze and thaw with every shift in the social climate, and rife with equal measures of languor and fuss. "Time Regained" is the title of Proust's final volume, but one should be wary of presuming that Ruiz has simply—or, indeed, intricately—adapted it for the screen. If anything, the movie seems to be both a loose, silvery dramatization and a careful inquiry into what it might be like—what it might wring out of a man, especially a weakening one—to write such a book. We begin in the bedroom of a bearded Proust (Marcello Mazzarella), as he dictates a particularly dazzling sentence of "In Search of Lost Time" to his housekeeper and scribe, Céleste (Mathilde Seigner). As if to help us on our way, he also takes up a magnifying glass and inspects a sheaf of photographs, naming each of the forthcoming characters in turn: Odette (Catherine Deneuve), his parents, Robert de Saint-Loup (Pascal Greggory), and Gilberte (Emmanuelle Béart). These, along with others, will rotate and sway through the rest of his story, like the shapes of a child's mobile above a crib.

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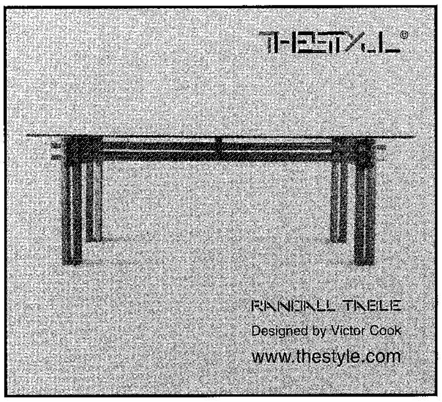

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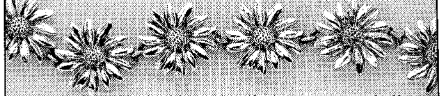

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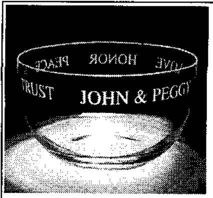

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five minutes, you will learn much about these people, perhaps more than they would like you to know; whether you will gather who they are is another matter. Confirmed Proustians should, you might think, have the advantage here; they will understand, for example, that Gilberte is the daughter of Odette and Swann (the hero, of sorts, of the earlier volumes, and thus conspicuous by his absence from these proceedings), and that Odette is mostly referred to in the film as Mme. de Forcheville—a reference to her later and lesser husband. And yet I cannot help feeling jealous of the novice. If you have never read the book, the movie will be a mystery, and that is exactly as it should be; Ruiz is never vague, but he tricks, entices, confuses, and overwhelms as if he were throwing a vast party, festooned with open secrets. You mingle with the movie, and eavesdrop on its conversations; you grasp nothing more than the half-life of these immaculate snobs and dupes, these fools for love, and thus you end up obeying the Proustian principle that nobody can be known, or loved, except in snatches—odd, unmatching offcuts from their real existence. Is Gilberte a flirt, or an ice maiden, or a worthy object of reverence? She is all three, depending on who you are, and what you want.

She is also Emmanuelle Béart, of course, which always helps. The first sight of her, clipping roses in a garden, is almost atrociously beautiful; you immediately see why men like Saint-Loup and the narrator would happily waste their lives on her behalf. It is appropriate that Béart should play the child of Deneuve, for both have the infuriating capacity—a defining French gift—of holding a movie together purely by gazing into the lens. You can imagine yourself looking forward to losing this Gilberte, and to the delicious pain of ruing that loss; she honors the perversity of the novel's nostalgia—a good thing, too, because, for all its other strengths, "Time Regained," in its clawing back of the past, does not move you as fiercely as you might expect. The Combray of the narrator's boyhood, summoned so indelibly in the earlier volumes, is fading by the time the book draws to a close, and the movie skips through those childish treasures in favor of social richesse.

So we are left with concerts, soirées,

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and awkward encounters in the park. We have a fine funeral, at which Mme. Verdurin (Marie-France Pisier) ruptures the Gallic pomp by complaining of a dropped earring; as the mourners peer and poke at the sacred ground, we are reminded how briskly Proust could bring himself to violate the very decorum that earned his pedantic respect. Ruiz's film, for all its loveliness, is like an antidote to costume drama; why else would his arrangements of furniture and foliage glide and shove so weirdly within the frame, if not to puncture the settled plush of the genre, and to hint that the beau monde, like its favorite possessions, is little more than an elegant prop to be dragged in and out of the wings? Far from being inveigled into the hauteur of that world, we are encouraged to view its noble protagonists as poor players who strut and fret their hours—their whole lifetimes—upon the stage. When they strike attitudes, Ruiz holds them fast; early in the movie, a crowd of onlookers is suddenly stilled, with their faces caked in white powder, while they watch the young narrator at play—as if everyone present were preparing to be a statue in his imaginary museum. Watching the movie again, I wondered whether all of it unfolds within the cranium of the expiring Proust, whether his bedroom is as much a greenhouse of memory as Charles Foster Kane's, and whether Gilberte, like the other young girls in flower, is just one of his innumerable Rosebuds.

"Time Regained" may be a French production of the greatest of French novels, but somehow the Frenchness doesn't swamp you; the ludic Ruiz is a Chilean, his Proust is an Italian, and his Charlus is an American, John Malkovich. In fact, Proust has been served more widely and respectably by the movies than you would think—far more so than Henry James, say, who at first blush would seem to be twice as filmable. The German director Percy Adlon made "Céleste," a dazzling sidelight on genius, with Eva Mattes as the author's devoted servant. Another German, Volker Schlöndorff, went to the front of the novel and came up with "Swann in Love": hardly an unqualified success, but braced by the stiff, stricken glamour of Alain Delon. His Charlus makes for an alluring comparison with Malkovich's; the Frenchman is numb with tragedy, the American more amused and fetishistic—observing his fellow-diners with a mirror concealed inside his top hat, and refusing to allow his appetites, however jaded, to die in the mouth of time.

If Ruiz's Proust is not as wrenching as the original, it compensates with the elastic reach of its comedy, and its unpredictable patchwork of shadows. Non-Proustians, who may have been put off by the silken, somewhat feminine reputation of the book, will be surprised by the violence of the film. It is all there in Proust, but you tend to hear less about it: the air-raid sirens moaning over the restaurant, or the Croix de Guerre left on the floor of a male brothel, where the sheets are sauced with blood from a recent whipping. Why on earth, you might ask, should we bother with the scandals and satisfactions of this ruinous crowd, the kind of people who demand "strawberries in ether," when Ruiz shows us newsreel footage of the First World War, in which thousands were dying every day? It is not enough to claim that Ruiz brings Proust to life; rather, the film confirms our suspicion that Proust brings us back to life—that, in its son et lumière of minute sensations, "Time Regained" echoes the heed that he paid to the stage directions of ordinary existence. Listen for the rattle of Mme. Verdurin's jewelry (a little too much, like the rest of her), the tap of spoon on teacup, and the repellent sound of Saint-Loup, back from the front, chewing militantly through his steak. These are not the things that history will remember us by, if it remembers us at all; but the asthmatic Proust, forever short of breath, knew that we would remember them at our last gasp. He was not fond of the cinema; but if he, and not merely his work, were alive today, he might well change his mind. ♦

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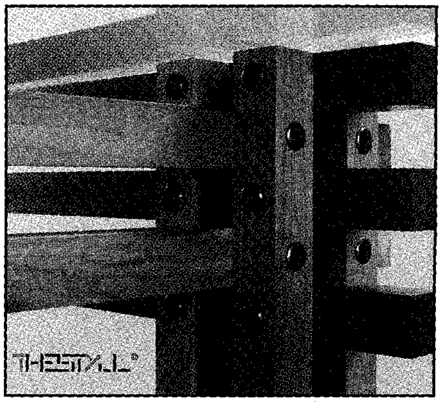

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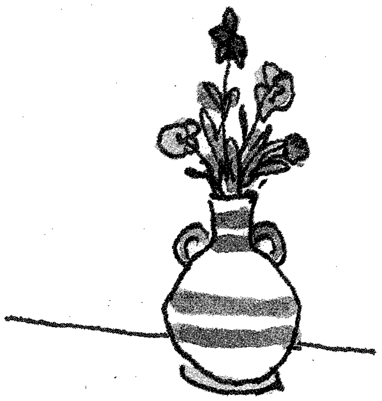


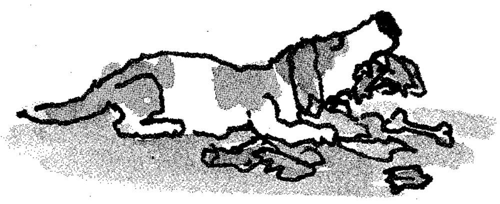
I MARRIED MY DOG

Last year, I married my dog.
Everyone came to see us
and we served dinner and dessert.

I was simply beautiful
and my dog looked nice, too.

My dog and I exchanged rings.
Then my dog gave me a flower
and I got very red.

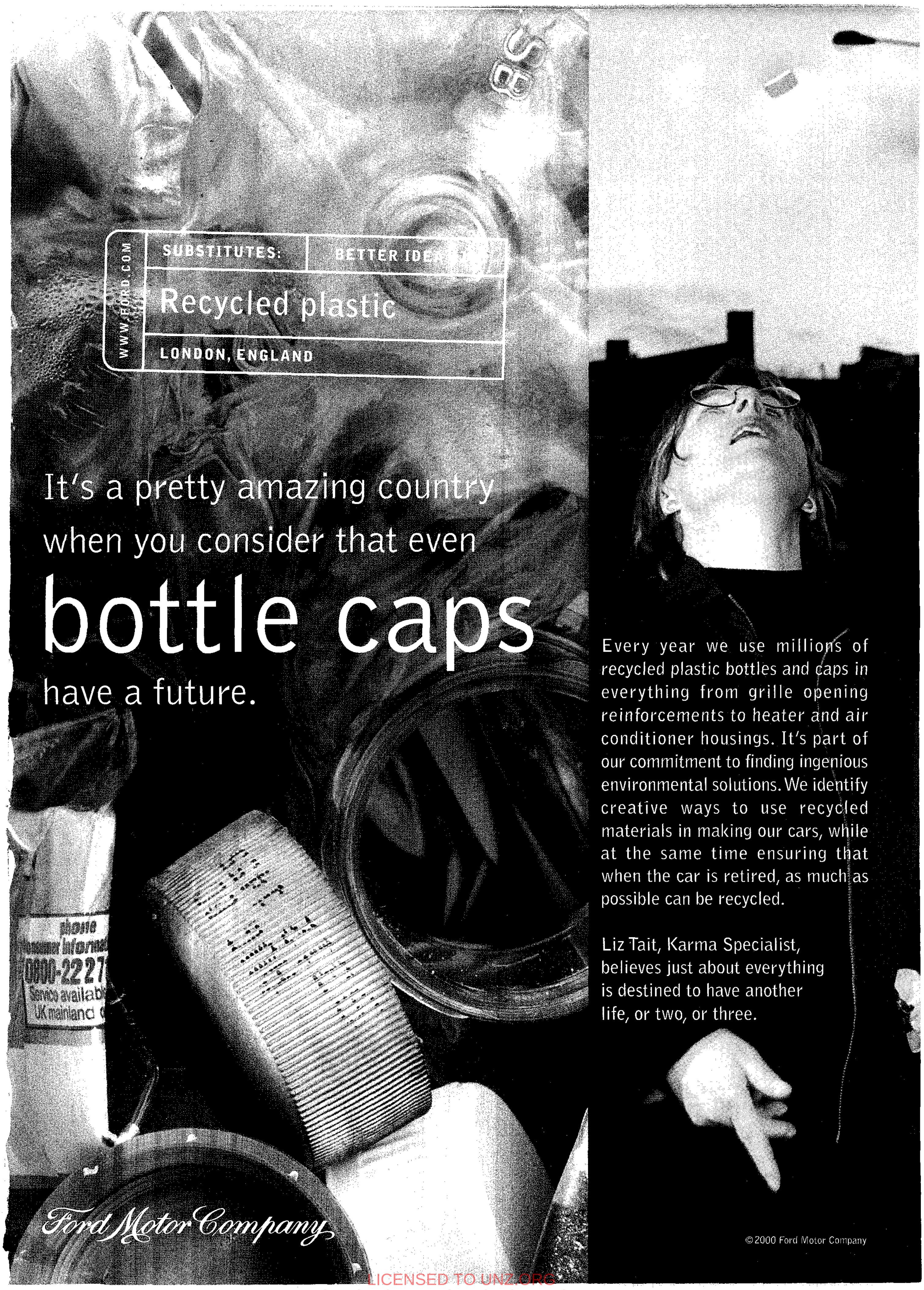
That night, my dog and I went to bed.
We put on our nightgowns and fell asleep.



In the morning, I got up first.
I put on my clothes and went downstairs.
An hour later, my husband came down.
I said good morning
but he didn't notice.
He just lay on the floor, eating.

I was disappointed for a while.
But I soon fixed that!
I married my cat.

—*Margaret Kemp Ross*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Liz Tait, Karma Specialist, believes just about everything is destined to have another life, or two, or three.

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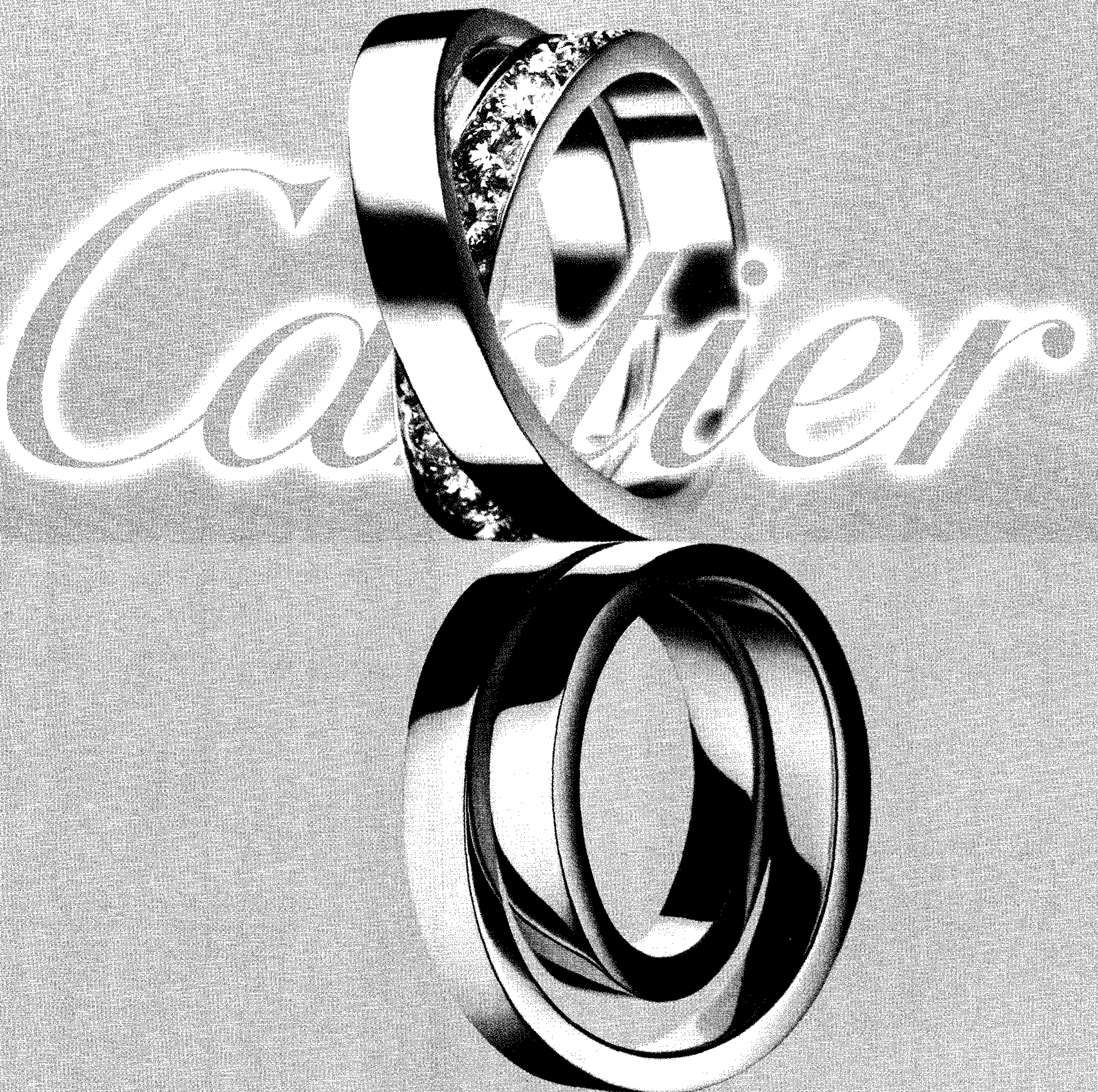

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